Extensa

Jacek Dukaj

I was six years old when Grandpa Michael passed away. I remember that I was six years old when Grandpa Michael passed away. I remember a lot. I used to play with Larisa by his grave, across the stream. There was a big oak tree there. We would climb up its branches. Grandpa's grave was on the left. In the afternoons, the oak's shadow moved toward it. We would lie down in the grass, beyond the reach of the gnarled roots of the patriarch tree, on the soft earth. The same insects would wander over our bodies. We would look into the thick blue, talk about nothing. Half asleep, half awake, childhood. Three crosses above us: Grandpa Michael, great-grandmother Kunegunda, Hieronymus; Hieronymus was the first.

Toward dusk, the shadow indicated the actual family cemetery: the one on the other side of the stream, under the willows. One hundred and seventy-eight crosses. Somehow it never occurred to me to ask what the stream was the border of.

We played under and on the oak tree, because it was the largest tree in the area. From its highest branches I could see the roofs of our farm, the windmill tower. I had read about Thales and the next day I measured the shadows —mine and the oak's. It was forty-seven paces of a six-year-old high. A plant-God, indeed. Larisa asked what I was doing as I walked slowly straight toward Grandpa Michael's grave. I was calling up spirits, I replied, because it really did have the appearance of a ritual. From the end of the shadow I jumped down between the crosses. Haaa-ha-haah! Legs raised high, deeply bent at the knees, arms sharply bent, face to the sky. This is how a child passes from play to play, there is no jarring in the successive chords. Larisa joined in. We danced. Giggling.

After the hundredth pirouette, I saw him sitting under the trunk, in the cradle of roots. He was smoking a pipe. I froze; Larisa looked around and saw him too.

"Grandpa!" she squealed and ran toward him.

Grandpa Michael smiled, stretched out his arms. She fell into his arms with full force. He groaned and laughed —I recognized the voice.

I went up to him. I picked up and handed him the pipe, knocked out by my sister's charge. He held the pipe with his left hand; with his right he stroked Larisa, she was already sitting on his lap, hugging him tightly by the neck,

tucking her head under his gray beard. Just a month ago she fell asleep like this, in the smell of his tobacco, under the touch of his big hands almost every evening. He carried her to bed afterward. Larisa was the youngest, he was her oak.

She was whispering something in his ear now. I stood and watched, just a moment and I would have run away. Grandpa looked up at me, smiled, winked. I smiled back.

I pointed my finger behind me, at the cross.

"You're dead."

He nodded.

"Yup."

So I didn't run away.

I sat down next to him. I touched his arm —through the rough material of his shirt; then directly his hand, his dry, wrinkled skin. He watched with a smile. Now I know, a child's wide-open eyes amused him. The eyes of a child, a mirror of naivety, everything in them is true, everything is completely normal, even in the greatest astonishment. "Where were you?" Larisa asked. "I was always with you, little squirrel," he whispered back, kissing her on the forehead. Tears in the old man's eyes, lakes of forgiven pain, forgiven wrongs.

He told us a fairy tale. Sometimes he told it like that. Now too; a long one. The prince and his Book. The Book was very old, it had remained in the family since time immemorial. When it came to making important decisions, the Prince —like everyone before him —would seek advice from his father. He would open the Book, utter a spell, and the spirit of the Old Prince would come. Until a particularly difficult choice came. "What to do," the Prince asks. His father doesn't know, but advises asking his own father —as he always has asked until now. He takes the Book and summons the Grandfather Prince. The Great-grandfather Prince. The Great-great-grandfather, the Great-great-great-grandfather... and so it goes, in the rhythm of a children's counting rhyme, in a descending cadence; we laughed and chanted together with Grandpa.

Larisa finally fell asleep. The sun was already setting, I remember the red of that sky, in such red I liked to fall asleep, on the veranda smelling of damp

wood, in the breath of a large house, open to the windy spaces with all its doors and windows... Home! We have to go back! I jumped up, Grandpa woke Larisa. She got up reluctantly. I pulled her, sleepily, by the hand.

"Remember the Book!" he called after us, no longer visible in the shadow of the mighty oak, as we waded through the cold stream. "Remember the Book!"

Then I wondered how this fairy tale actually ended; how it could possibly end.

I had more than one opportunity to ask him, but at the time it somehow didn't occur to me. It's not easy to keep a six-year-old's attention span long.

Grandpa's ghost, on the other hand, told me many other things. I remember a great many things.

I

It begins unnoticed, usually with a platitude.

One day —how old are you then? No more than a dozen years —you realize that you will never be a child again. You will never live through an hour or a minute of that time again. The switch has already closed, everything is lost, all the chances. Like a wave function —you collapse from all possibilities into one single state. You will carry this and only this childhood with you into eternity. You lose it with each passing day.

We all seem to know this well —but you suddenly understand the final consequences, you assimilate this inevitability to the very core of your soul, and your legs buckle, your head spins, you sit down on the ground, terrified, desperate, your heart beats hard, slowly. You count, one-two, three-four, five-six, these are the steps of death, this is how it creeps, this is how it measures, the atomic clock of the universe, the metronome of half-lives, the hourglass of entropy.

To get out, you need small things: the taste of a fresh apple, the smell of the night, the laughter of your little sister... You will get up, you will get up eventually, we all get up. Behind you, on the ground, an impish shadow: the corpse of a child.

We bred horses. The herd numbered over two hundred. When we herded them all into the corral, the thunder of their hooves made the stones turn in their underground lairs. Only we and the Zapartisans bred on such a scale;

but the Zapartisan herd was almost half as large. In the spring, we drove our mounts across the endless meadows of the Green Country, and it happened once that somewhere in that infinity the herds met, ran into each other, got mixed up. From that time on we branded the animals. Our mark was two inverted horseshoes; the Zapartisans' —a cross. The branding of the foals took place mostly outside, in the paddock. Sometimes I sat on the fence, watching. But I wasn't there when Dad and Grandpa Michael marked Third Star. Ezekiel told me; and then Grandpa himself. Third Star broke free for a moment and, still lying down, kicked so hard that she struck the old man's chest with her hoof. The foal's blow was not strong, but Grandpa Michael clearly felt something shift in his body there. He lost his breath and sat down heavily. After a moment, pain appeared, burning, stabbing. Dad, Ezekiel and Aunt Tekla were leaning over Grandpa. "It's all right, it's all right," he panted. It wasn't all right. They carried him home, to his room on the first floor of the annex. He wanted to go alone, but it turned out they had to take him under the arms; and it ended with them carrying him —they called Nathaniel to help. Little John galloped off for the Doctor. That's when I found out. I immediately ran to Grandpa, but half the family was already milling around there and Mom drove us away, me and Larisa. Larisa was crying. (It was like this with Larisa's crying: sometimes it would provoke wild fits of anger in me, I would shout at my sister, mock her, make faces, so she would sob all the louder, so the anger grew greater in me ... and sometimes —her crying would raise high waves of compassion, a twin sadness, I would clumsily try to calm her down, I would mumble some consolations, hug her tightly, children rely so much on physicality, touch and warmth soothed all our nightmares... Sometimes anger, sometimes compassion —and it seemed that there was no rule to predict which reaction pattern would prevail.) Larisa, her eyes full of tears, hid under the stairs; I crawled in after her. Dark places, warm, stuffy places, places of semi-darkness —there is safety, there is comfort. "He'll die, He'll die," she sobbed. She had heard this sentence from someone outside Grandpa's door and now she repeated it aloud, it was her greatest fear, because it was completely incomprehensible. "He won't die," I said, "He won't die." "He'll die, He'll die, He'll die." Less than a year earlier, cousin Malgorzata had died. She was alive in the evening, dead in the morning; we never saw her again. When asked, Dad replied that death had taken her. Now all her childhood fears of the unknown returned to Larisa. Her thumb went to her mouth, she squeezed herself into the corner of the alcove —thin knees under her chin, her toes curled up, her straw-colored hair hiding her swollen eyes. My heart was broken by the grimace of boundless despair on her plump

face, her lips twisted in tears. Crying among children is contagious; the longer I looked at her, the closer I felt to tears. My lips were already trembling, my cheeks were already tingling. Suddenly I grabbed her by the arm. "Come on." I tugged, once, twice, three times, harder and harder, until she finally moved and from then on she let herself be led. "Come on, let's see."

Our house consisted of a dozen or so smaller and larger buildings arranged in a rectangle around the oldest part: a wooden farmhouse. Currently, only guests spend the night in the cottage, but it remained the axis of the complex. The largest building (in which we also lived) adjoined it from the east: three-stories, brick, with six chimneys, a spacious veranda and a long porch. Grandpa's annex was located at its back. The porch surrounded the large building, we also used it as a corridor, this is how we went from room to room. We (the children) often snuck up to the windows of rooms closed to us and eavesdropped, spied. Even more often, we simply chased each other around the porch until we lost our breath or an angry adult intervened. Mother would shout that we would eventually break our necks. If anything, it would not be like this —there were much more likely ways. Little John showed me one night how to climb onto a roof and how to get from there to the roofs of other buildings. From the perspective of the roof, everything was different, places I knew perfectly well suddenly turned out to be exotic structures of secret purpose. I climbed whenever I could – which was mainly at night, because during the day there was always the risk of discovery. But there was something else in it: the drug of heights. From the roof I could even see the oak tree. I climbed the oak tree; from it I could see our roofs. There was also this: the breath of vast spaces. Especially at night, on warm starry nights. Six years, a thousand dreams, I climbed between the twin square chimneys, lifted my face, opened my mouth, swallowed the night in long gulps; the night swallowed me. The hand of the wind in my hair, a brush of smells in my throat (earth, grass, smoke, earth), a rush in my ears, the terrible, magnificent rush of infinite spaces; that inaudible roar that is the background of every silence, and on such nights simply bursts your skull. Leaning back against the chimney, with my eyes wide open, my mouth half-open, I was trembling, cold, feverish. (Now I am certain: if it weren't for Little John, if it weren't for the roofs of our farm —I wouldn't have accepted Master Bartholomew's cup.)

However, in this kingdom there were lower paths and easy thrills. I led Larisa. I knew that from the porch you could jump onto the bay window of the annex and then move along it, foot by foot, to look into the interior of Grandpa's

bedroom. Of course, this jump was a mortal risk —but a child doesn't see it that way. We both jumped —I first, she after me —and we didn't even look down. Crouching, we approached the window, raising our heads in unison. It was already evening, behind us was the shadow of the cloudy sky; in front of us —the warm light of a room full of people.

There was Grandpa Michael —lying in bed, motionless, we could see his hands on the blanket and the hump of his nose; there was the Doctor —he walked in circles from the door to the bed and back, every now and then he leaned over Grandpa and listened to the rhythm of his breathing, pulse; there was Dad, Uncle Anastasy, Uncle Karol, the twin aunts; there was the Pastor, whose arrival I had not noticed —he was sitting in a chair at the foot of the bed, with his back to the window, with his head bowed, it looked as if he was sleeping, but then we were convinced that he was actually reading from a prayer book open on his lap.

It lasted long minutes, quarters of an hour. It was already getting dark, the pre-night wind had picked up, I recognized it by its smell. Every now and then the bedroom door opened, relatives looked inside. The twin aunts started crying again. The Doctor opened his bag, metal and glass flashed. He pricked Grandpa's arm, pumped some dark liquid into his vein, then reached into his vest, glanced at his watch. Grandpa's fingers were clenching the blanket; I was clutching Larisa's sweaty hand. What were we waiting for there, clinging to the windowsill, glued to the wall five meters above the ground? What secret were we hoping to spy on?

Because after all, we had spied. Grandpa suddenly sat up, we saw his face, terrified eyes, saliva and blood on his beard. He began to cough, clutching his chest. The Doctor rushed to him, Dad rushed to him, the rest of the family —until the Doctor had to shout at them, only then did they move away. Grandpa, his face twisted in pain, whispered something hoarsely. They must not have understood him, because they suddenly fell silent, and then the Pastor's words rang out clearly: "The law of the Lord is perfect —strengthens the spirit; the testimony of the Lord is sure, instructs the simple; the Lord's commandments are right —they gladden the heart; the Lord's commandment shines and enlightens the eyes..." Larisa grabbed me tightly by the shirt, turned her head away from the window. "He'll die, he'll die, he'll die, he'll die." "So he'll die; will you finally be quiet?!" I growled.

For there inside strange things were happening. The doctor raised his empty hands above his head and stepped away from the bed. Dad, aunts and uncles stood in silence, suddenly petrified. The pastor, leaning right over Grandpa Michael, shouted at him with fury:

"Go to the grave! Go to the grave! Go to the grave!"

I didn't really know what that meant. Was it the refrain of another prayer? The pastor uttered those three words in a voice reserved for damning sermons; he had his back to the window, but I could perfectly imagine what his face looked like now.

The strangest thing was that Grandpa didn't seem to hear him anyway. He stared blankly ahead —somewhere to the right, that is, to the corner of the bedroom between the bed and the door —and panted. Bubbles of blood burst on his lips. I started to feel like vomiting. I swallowed with effort.

Suddenly the Pastor fell silent. Someone shouted; one of the aunts, I think. The light bulb flickered, and for a moment the room became darker, as if a large moth had circled the lamp. A shadow swelled in the place where Grandpa Michael was staring; it swelled, grew, swelled to cover a third of the room, then quickly retreated and dissolved. A green dress, a rose in dark hair, tanned, bare shoulders. She smiles warmly, approaching Grandpa, sitting on the bed, taking the old man's trembling hand; he smiles at her.

Great silence. The pastor raises his arm, as if to strike Moses. Dad catches his arm, holds him. Aunt Joanna turns away from them all, rests her forehead against the wall.

The young woman with the rose in her hair lays Grandpa back on the bed, puts a pillow under his head. In this silence I would have heard if she had said something; she says nothing. She leans over Grandpa. I thought she was going to kiss him —but she doesn't. She wipes his half-open mouth with the back of her hand, gently closes his eyelids. She is still smiling slightly. She has silver earrings in her ears, small, shiny.

Then she stands up, looks at me, smooths her dress and disappears into thin air.

A month after beautiful Death took him, we met Grandpa Michael under the oak tree and he told us a story.

Later, he still visited us, me and my sister, when we were together, but much more often he came to us alone. I know that he appeared regularly to lull Larisa to sleep, she waited for him every evening. For me, there was such a time and such a place too —namely, I had only to climb onto the roof.

Where he came from, where he went —he had to move along the airways, otherwise I would hear him, heavy footsteps on clattering roof tiles.

He would sit leaning against the neighboring chimney, we would look in the same direction. The wind carried the smell of his tobacco into the darkness.

“King Midas broke his leg. Dad says it won’t heal properly.”

“It was a wild horse.”

“I think they’ll shoot him. Daniel was at the Market and spent a lot of money. He announces that he’s going to get married. Everyone is furious.”

“Ha, I remember when he brought that red-headed girl from Mesenites. Then the middle of the night and suddenly we hear a clatter, a shot and screams. Relatives demanded it. We would have had a second Troy here.”

“Grandpa, did you also meet Grandma at the Market?”

“You see, kid, there are markets and markets, heh, heh. But no. It was in one of the spring of miracles. We were leading the herd from the coast when it started to rain diamonds. A few moments and the earth looked like it had been hit by a heavy hailstorm. Cousin Thomas’ eye was put out. Oh, that scar, do you see? —that’s also from then. The horses went crazy, of course. We had to split up to find the most frightened ones, the ones that had run the farthest —and a dozen of them got lost somewhere. Besides, they all had wounded hooves. I went west. There were smaller and larger groves on the way; I had to check every single one: they could have taken shelter there, the ground was clean only there. But of course the trees themselves were also Perverted and when they...”

”Per... what?”

“Ah. It was metallic rime then. You know, as if they had all been covered, down to the last leaf, with a thin layer of iron. After such a spring the ground remains barren for decades. Have you ever been beyond the Second River? Take a look at the Waterfalls, there is still the Petrified Grove of the twenty-seventh.”

“Aunt Isabel’s rose.”

“No. It’s crystal, it turned into crystal then.”

“A person? Can they also be protected like that?”

“Don’t be afraid, it doesn’t happen often. Hmm, so I ride into this grove and hear some terrible quarrel. I look: three girls in underwear are fighting over some rag. Ha, and when they saw me... Dear God!”

“Why were they in their underwear?”

“They went there for a picnic and I took them by surprise, their clothes had rusted into the grass. It seems that only that one blouse survived, but when they started arguing about it...”

“Grandma was one of them?”

“No. Their oldest sister. I went to their farm to let the family know and Teresa brought them clothes.”

“Did you propose to her then?”

“No, would you? I didn’t see her at all for the next two years. Except that we talked a little that evening; I spent the night with them, helped to repair the major damage. Then we went out for a chat, it just so happened that mother had thrown her out of the kitchen... Teresa still had her apron covered in flour. It was a full moon, like now. I started telling fortunes from the moon clouds, we joked... stuff like that...“

“So, grandpa? When did you decide to marry her?”

“What are you suddenly thinking about this marriage?”

“But-but, because Daniel...”

“Daniel...! Don’t listen to the poor fool. When I decided, hmm. It was

somehow so small. I forgot about her altogether. Two years, yes, two years. I sat down after some serious disappointment and began to wonder which woman, in whose presence, with whose smile, I felt best with. Until I came to Teresa and that was the end of the competition; and then I thought about her for the first time in about a year. Somehow those few quarters of an hour that evening... What the heck, I said to myself, I came up with an excuse and went to their farm. I had calculated: that she got married; that she'd be completely different... But she was the same. She started teaching me fortune-telling. Then she came to us for the holidays. That was it. It quickly became clear that sooner or later we would get married. Are you asleep?"

"No. Did she teach you?"

"Hmm?"

"Can you tell fortunes?"

"They say different things."

"Please, Please!"

"A Good full moon. A storm on Mar Imbrium, I don't tell fortunes about money. What do you want to know?"

"Oh. I don't know. Will Daniel get married."

"About you, about you; I don't tell fortunes about the absent, the moon has to look you in the face."

"Okay. When will I die?"

"Where did you get that from..."

"No, grandpa. Please!"

"True, it's a stupid question. Hmm, if I'm to tell you fortunes, don't look at me, look at him."

"I'm looking."

"Okay. Tell me when."

"..."

"..."

"Now."

"..."

"No?"

"I shouldn't. Go to sleep."

"Grandpa..."

But he was gone.

For a long time I thought that the reason for his sudden irritation was the fact that he had seen in the movement of the fast winds of the moon how little life I had left; that he had read my death from them, tragic and premature. So I had thought for years. Yet who was the fortune-teller? A ghost, a ghost.

DANIEL did get married. There was a wedding. Neighbors and relatives came. Three dozen children I had never seen before filled the house. The old cottage was not enough —there were guests everywhere. It lasted into the second and third nights. Everyone must have lost track of time. Having overeaten, I fell asleep on a long sofa in the large living room on the ground floor. Heavy, noisy dreams repeatedly threw me to the other side of reality, sweaty from fantastic fears. People came in, went out, a dog (not ours) got tangled up, someone covered me with a blanket —I threw it on the floor. It must have been dawn when I woke up once again, nestled in the soft chest of Aunt Lana. My aunt had a large family album spread out on her lap —she was telling the story of individual photos to a stranger who was sitting on the other side, still with a glass in her hand, and every now and then she would lean over and tilt her head to get a better look at the black-and-white images of the past in that grey, murky light. My aunt's left hand absently ruffled my hair; perhaps that was what had woken me up.

I instinctively followed her plump finger with my gaze.

"This is Grandma Kunegunda, before she married Julian," Aunt Lana would say, pointing to a photo of dark-haired Death, even younger, this time in a white

dress; she was wading toward the photographer through a silver stream.

"Oh, her," the stranger sighed and raised her glass to her lips.

I fell asleep.

Larisa was also sleeping, and just as restlessly. Grandpa Michael couldn't have come to her, not in such a crowd. She spoke to him loudly in her sleep. Our mother heard.

LIGHTNING struck from horizon to horizon, black grease flooded the sky, in the middle of the day all the lights in the house were on, when Dad came down from the porch with a lamp in his raised hand and shouted into the wind, into the furious darkness:

"Father! Father!"

Mother held me tightly, otherwise I probably would have run down the porch after him. Despite the loud noise of the wind I could hear Larisa's cries coming from inside the house —it had been a few hours since the beating Dad had given us, and she was still sobbing. It was the back yard of the farm, but a few late guests had ventured here too, they stood by the wall and exchanged anxious glances. The wind tore at their clothes, their hair. The rushing air, the rushing blood roared in my ears.

"Father! Father!"

He stopped at the old well, there was the edge of shadow, for the yard was cut evenly by a curtain of stormy darkness. He put the lamp on the beam. He looked around, raised his face to the still greater darkness. I dug my fingers into my mother's hand, my hair began to stand on end.

"Father!"

He rose from the ground, from the sudden cloud of dust, like a black golem. A fool! —and there he stood, holding out his hand to his son, with the other he held back the hurricane. Teeth flashed in his ruffled beard as he answered questions I could not hear; I could not hear those answers either. Father stood with his back to us, grandfather with his face. He only had to look up, shift his

gaze, and our eyes would meet —through the dust, through the wind, through the shadow. Look! Look at me!

Mother pressed me against her side, we breathed quickly; something was happening here, something important, but the moment did not allow for questions, I could only stand and watch.

They were arguing. Father waved his hands. Grandfather, sitting on the well, scratched the bridge of his nose. The movements of Dad's arms drove large shadows from the lamp toward him. A dry storm was thundering behind Grandpa's back.

He was sad, I could see. Once he tried to reach out to his son; Dad jumped back as if scalded. He grabbed the lamp and slowly walked toward the porch, backwards, step by step, still shouting.

"Don't come any closer! You won't touch them! Go away!"

He reached the stairs. Darkness followed the retreating light and Grandpa was drowned behind a vertical curtain. With the lamp in his raised hand, Father shouted to the wind, to the furious darkness:

"You won't enter! You won't enter!"

A minute, two, ten, we were surrounded by a wall of night, the gale was pressing from all sides, several windows burst, the wood cracked somewhere, the house creaked and almost shook, I hid my face against my mother's womb, terrified. Children were crying, dogs howling. What must be happening to the horses, the chickens and the pigs... "Cursed" whispered my mother. Who? But I knew: Grandpa Michael, him.

I was glancing through my fingers: he was circling on the edge of the storm, alternately emerging and hiding in the darkness, the hurricane exploded with clouds of rubble in places where he emerged into the light. He was wailing and pleading. "You don't know what you're doing! Why, why this suffering...? No one will die!"

"Keep the Covenant!" Dad kept repeating. "You won't enter! Stay Out!" He held the lamp up.

"No one will die!"

"Keep the Covenant!"

Words probably didn't matter anymore, what counted was persistence, a demonstration of determination. Now I remember it, and I know that none of them could have done otherwise. Because what was stopping Grandpa if not words? He had invisible armies behind him, he had the powers of darkness, thunder and lightning in his left hand, our defenseless bodies in his right; he had, he had. But he walked around and screamed.

I was crying too. I realized when my mother wiped my tears once again.

"Mom, what's wrong with Grandpa?"

"He sold his soul."

Did he sell his soul? The memory of the Pastor's anger came back.

"To the devil?"

She hugged me, pulling me deeper into the house.

"Worse, worse."

I track down the words of an impossible language in cracked leather-bound encyclopedias, dictionaries, and lexicons... "Thanatophobia: A Morbid Fear of Death."

So whose fear was healthy? Grandpa Michael's? Father's? Mine?

Grandpa never showed up again. Although I often went to the cemetery by the stream, in the shade of an oak tree. Three crosses. The smell of his pipe. I knew there were gates.

That fall I turned seven. The Seed was already approaching the Medusa comet cloud, two hundred billion kilometers, the first reproducible impulses, disturbances in the gradients of gravity and the asymmetry of the solar wind's wings, shivers on my skin; and the star slowly grew from a red point, a crystal of caustic salt in the eye of the beholder —when no one was looking.

I remember, I remember everything.

II

In the sixteenth winter of my life, when we were visiting the Market, I got tangled up in the Markets of Ideas between two revolutionaries. It seems I spoke unwisely to one of them; they then shouted at each other above me, one spitting quotes from the Bible, the other from von Neumann. The degree of pathos in their words seemed inversely proportional to the state of personal hygiene. (Later I will find the word "decadence" in the dictionaries.)

"How much suffering do you think humanity is worth...?!" the von Neumann guy shouted. "Why electricity and not caves? Why?!"

"It's always a small step!" the biblical scholar spat back. "Always changes for the better! Only after a thousand steps do you not know what's better; something else must be better!"

"So like an animal, huh?! In the mud! In the mud! In the mud!"

"Then go to Them, please, the way is clear! Pfft!"

Father took me from under their gazes, still staring hypnotically at their red faces and trembling hands (they waved them aimlessly, or maybe in order to intimidate the adversary).

"Radicals. At least we know the value of moderation thanks to them, " he smiled. "Come."

"What if one of them was gone and the other found someone even more radical than himself..." I counted under my breath, looking at the tips of my

shoes. “Would we be the silent extreme?”

“Oh, but there are more of us.”

I shook my head.

“There are more of them.”

I was already mature enough then to know the true meaning of pronouns suspended in the void, without much thought, to use language that allows one to speak freely about what cannot be spoken directly. Not because someone forbade it —after all, that is what taboo is all about, that the law does not even have to sanction it, taboo comes before the law. (What is taboo after all...?)

So I was mature enough —but not yet mature enough to recognize when I should no longer answer my father, especially when the answer is negative. He was still a father to me first and foremost; a man, a man —only later. Perhaps this is the door to true maturity: when you go through it, adults cease to be creatures from a foreign land, whose motives and thoughts you will never understand; instead, they become the same lost fools as you, only older, and you are able to sympathize with their dilemmas, and sometimes —even understand them.

But I did not understand my father yet.

“Are you so wise?” he snorted, quickening his pace toward our wagons.

Larisa, from the back of Fire, pointed to the western horizon with a coiled whip.

“Are we going around?”

A wall of dark decay still fenced the land there, stretching from the ground to the sky. Blue stains a mile across moved slowly across it, following the course of the subsurface currents of darkness.

”What did they say in the Vault?” Daniel asked.

Father waved his hand and climbed onto the box.

”Well, what did they say?” Daniel pressed.

"They're just scaring us," Father muttered. "We're going around."

"He glanced back at his cousins' wagon. "Where's Anna?"

"Damn it, she must have run off somewhere again."

Everyone started looking around for the little one. I mounted Worm and, pulling on my gloves, rode out from behind the wagons. Standing in the stirrups, with my back to the evil west, I looked out for Anna among the buildings of the Market (everyone always told me I had the best eyesight in the family). But I didn't see her; that evening there must have been over a thousand people there, a record, if you don't count the equinox holidays. They filled the space between the tents, ruins and carts with such a mass of human chaos that spotting a single five-year-old girl in it bordered on a miracle.

The Market, as the name itself explains, serves as a place of exchange. Goods and words, people and animals are exchanged here. Only thanks to the Market does the currency of the Green Country retain its value; and yet not everyone recognizes those ancient banknotes. Here, in the ruins of the largest building, courts are held and laws are made —to the extent that one wishes to consider these meetings of heads of individual families and managers of farms as a real court and legislature. There are photographs in the books of real state institutions, buildings and crowds of people —large, enormous. So I know the difference. There is no state in the Green Country. "The State" says Daniel "is a homeostatic machine. It reacts to changes in internal and external conditions. It takes care of maintaining the structure of connections connecting its components and their total usefulness for the realization of various goals in various situations for the needs of this structure. Once established, it perishes only in the act of murder. It never frees those it has taken into slavery. It never ceases its efforts to strengthen the structure. Do you see what lies at the end of this path? Do you see this STATE?" Here Daniel leans over his interlocutor. "We will never, never have it in the Country; that would be the end. We don't. We have the Market. But, as the biblical scholar said, it's always a small step. Those from the north, the fundamentalists —as his father would call them, the radicals —don't even recognize the Market; they never come here, and we don't venture there either. It's not a Covenant, just a custom, but perhaps that's all the more powerful —he who is before the law."

We spread out around the Market to look for little Anna. Finally Sasha Kuternog found her; there was a signal from the wagons (two torches) and we

gathered there again. In the meantime, however, the evening turned into early night, the western horizon was no longer visible at all, no stars, no clouds, soon the Moon will also disappear behind this curtain.

"We'd better spend the night here" I suggested. Most of the visitors to the Market decided to do just that, they set up tents, lit fires; The pastor turned on the neon sign above the gate to the Crypt, where a board with current guidelines had been hung after the Kad members had left the dungeons. "In the morning, it should become clear what and how."

I saw that others were nodding in agreement with the proposal —but since it came from me, my father only shrugged, muttered: "A waste of time" and cracked his whip.

So we set off into that dark night of perversion. That's probably what Grandpa Michael would say), a small caravan of four wagons and five riders —and that decision determined the shape of my entire life.

THE neighing of Worm and the shudder of his muscles under my thighs, the sharp smell of animal sweat —I was already galloping alone, separated from the rest; whether the horse had carried me away or whether I, ridden by fear, had subconsciously dug my spurs into the sides of the mount, it is hard to say. That everyone was afraid —that is clear. Before I lost them in the depths of the night, their hysterical cries, already half hoarse, pierced my brain —through my inner ear, eardrum and ossicles. Above the howling of the wind, above the squeals of animals, above the crackling of the air; above my own breathing. Characteristically, the children were silent. Daniel cursed loudly. Father screamed incomprehensibly, cracking his whip and jerking the reins; the other drivers answered him with terrified cries. Larisa called to me, I heard my name through the darkness until the end. Then only Worm's neighing. The trembling of his muscles, as I shivered in the saddle —and another Monster leaned out of the night toward me.

Did we involuntarily enter the zone of horror, or did it deliberately reach out to us? It began with the strange, silver sheen of grass and the hard crunch with which hooves and wheels crushed it. Then we felt it in our breath; someone coughed, Daniel immediately rose in the stirrups and waved to his father, who was driving the first wagon: "Back! We're turning around!" The caravan began

to make a tight circle. Then we saw the bird. It dived above us, then rose twenty meters, where it circled for a moment; a seabird, a seagull or an albatross. Diving again, it multiplied in the air by five —bird, bird, bird, bird, and bird —and it was already clear that we were under the Perversion. Daria grabbed her rifle, started shooting at them, reloading quickly. Before Daniel could stop her, she had knocked down two albatrosses. I rode up to the nearest one. I couldn't see clearly without a torch. It had fallen onto the gravel. It was flapping there in silence, not bleeding or losing feathers. It was the size of the first, "original" albatross, which struck me as absurd. "Leave it!" someone shouted at me, because I was involuntarily leaning deep in the saddle. I looked back at the screamer, and when I looked back at the bird... Well, the albatross was gone, there was a hole in the ground, a black crater in the gravel, from which acrid smoke began to emerge. I jerked Worm back. Wu-boom, wu-boom, wu-boommmmm —I counted, staring, three heartbeats, and then the crater vomited up a hideous thing. They must have been animals, since they moved so quickly, but any fraternity of form with the fauna of the Country I knew was a matter of surreal association. Small as ants, large as dogs; with legs and without legs; with heads and without heads (or with more than one); in fur, in skin, in mucus, in feathers, in colored membranes; quiet and screeching, squeaking, howling, singing, talking ("Me, me, me, me! Wi-wi-wi-wi-kooo!"); walking, crawling, jumping, flying. No two were the same. A butterfly-like crocodile flew up and bit Worm on the leg. The horse squealed piercingly, kicking sideways. Thus began the panic. "Come on!" shouted Father, cracking his whip. The overloaded carts rolled along slowly. Behind us, out of the darkness, out of the ground, cohort after cohort emerged. "Come on!" he repeated and coughed. I saw Larisa pass a gloved hand in front of her face and pick something out of the air. We looked at each other. "Indian summer" she said, smiling slightly, childishly. Our horses jumped away from each other in the confusion, trampling the carpet of Monsters. Daniel began to curse in a loud voice. I looked. The earth was already moving on all sides; we were surrounded. The wind began to rise, whipping my face more and more strongly, irritating my skin. Something fell softly on my head; I drew in a breath and it pushed itself down my throat. I tore off the shiny veil. Worm trembled beneath me and tossed his head. A woman began to cry. Something living settled on my shoulder. Someone started shooting; I looked in the direction of the noise —but there was only darkness, it had devoured the last two wagons in the caravan, a heavy mass of darkness, the night like a swelling stone. I think I squeezed Worm with my heels then. There was one thought: a horse is faster than a cart, a horse is faster than the

night.

So I galloped ahead, blindly.

I didn't know that Worm was bleeding, that he was bleeding out. Would I have behaved differently if I had known? Probably not; definitely not. I would have urged him on in the same way. Mortal fear is a physiological state, it can be recognized among other things by the taste in the mouth —a little bit iron, a little bit bitter; a certain pain of the palate and numbness of the tongue are also inevitable. The body rules.

I didn't know that he was bleeding, and when he fell over, I was convinced that some exceptionally furious Monster had caught us. I managed to throw my feet out of the stirrups and jump down; I didn't break my legs, but I completely lost my bearings. The darkness was impenetrable. I landed in the mud and was instantly glad that it was mud and not a pandemic swarm, all the more terrible because it was completely invisible in this Egyptian darkness.

It was about fear, now it will be about courage. Well, convinced that some hellish monster was feasting on Worm there, I nevertheless approached the animal, knife in hand, I crept toward the place where the prolonged wheezing was coming from. To be honest, the motivation was rather a hysterical need to arm myself, even if only symbolically, with the rifle hanging from the saddle. (It is true what they say: it is fear that drives us to heroic deeds). Nevertheless, it was pure courage; I know, even though it has no taste.

What next? Having taken off my gloves, I felt for the rifle, with my heart in my throat; then I found Worm's head and finished him off with a shot from a point blank range. Still, nothing would bite me —and so fear drove me to greater and greater risks. Namely, I began to rummage laboriously in the saddlebags. I noticed that the wind had died down considerably; looking around thoughtlessly, while my hands worked independently, I saw a few dozen rapidly blinking sparks in the darkness: an unobstructed fragment of the night sky. This would be my guide. I would light a torch. At least I would see where I was walking. I had a weapon. I would make it. That one was far behind me. Larisa had certainly escaped on Fire. (I had not thought about my father: it was obvious to me that nothing could happen to him). It would be all right.

I lit a torch, stood up —and saw that it had already devoured my entire left arm, crawling up my shoulder.

It was silver-blue in color; it gleamed wetly in the flickering torchlight. It covered the sleeves of my shirt and jacket, my hand, my fingernails. I felt nothing on my skin —but it must have been an inch thick. I stared motionless, fascination bordering on catatonia. The flame crackled above my head. The night pulsated with echoes of distant cacophonies. Like a river wave, like a snake's tongue, like a shadow at dusk —it moved slowly, timidly. It touched my neck. I shuddered involuntarily, and that shudder finally broke the spell from me.

I tore off my jacket and shirt. Beneath them, my body was free of silver mold, except for a few thin veins. I began to wipe the plague from myself, first by rubbing it on my trousers, then, transferring the torch to my left hand, scratching with the knife. It took a long time; finally, as far as I could judge without a mirror, I was free of the growth. My skin was red, clearly irritated —from the growth, from the knife, perhaps from both.

I decided to leave the contaminated clothing. Picking up the rifle, I set off.

Two thousand paces further on I noticed silver on both trouser legs.

I can imagine what an impression I made on him. Besides, he told me later.

I didn't wake him, he wasn't sleeping. He heard banging on the door from upstairs. He opened it in one of his dressing gowns; the long skirts were tangled around his legs, he had to constantly pull them up so as not to step on them.

He opened the door and almost took a step back. A naked madman stood in the doorway, covered in mud; in one hand —a shotgun, in the other —a dirty knife; in his eyes —hysteria. Red welts of cuts peeked out from under the mud. He waved the knife as if preparing for another self-mutilation, and he panted through clenched teeth.

"Come in, please," said Master Bartholomew, seizing his dressing gown and moving to the wall.

"Mirror!" I croaked. "Where's a mirror?!

He took his glasses out of his pocket and put them on, and looked at me carefully. Then he pointed down the corridor with his open hand. I rushed

through the entrance to the nearest room.

"Guest in the house, God in the house," Master Bartholomew muttered behind me, closing the door.

THEY say that the first impression is the most important, but I don't think that's really the case.

When I first saw his house (Bartholomew called it "the manor"), I thought: another ruin. True, I saw only a shadow, an outline of a silhouette against the stars. I didn't look for long —a flash of light in one of the windows was enough. Light! People! Help! My mind was dominated by one idea: that I was being devoured. To such an extent that at times the image obscured the outside world from me, muffled the stimuli.

"...What did you say?"

"Take a bath. I said: take a bath. Or at least wash yourself somehow. You're spreading this mud all over my carpets. I don't have any bigger mirrors! Sit down. Or better yet, take a bath, there's a bathroom there."

"Did you say something?"

That's how it must have looked —until I ran out of energy. Then I fell asleep in his armchair in the living room.

The living room on the ground floor of Bartholomew's manor was the only room worthy of the name that I had the privilege of seeing, apart from the pages of old books. Everything here was antique, including the armchair that I had clung to for good during the night. It had its back to the windows, and when I woke up, I saw a museum of forbidden times, immersed in horizontal streams of morning light. I could count the streams, divided by doorframes, curtains, furniture. There was even a television set in the corner, a large, black one, with the dim eye of the picture tube staring out at the bright world; the set, of course, did not work. Somewhere in the building, a clock ticked loudly. Apart from that, there was complete silence. I hissed, rising from the armchair, the leather was clearly coming off along with the mud —but it did not help, the silence tightly wadded the entire manor, not a sound answered. Bartholomew —is he asleep? Has he gone somewhere? I was alone.

That was how I began my tour of the museum. There were things here that we had here too, only here there were more of them and in better condition, original ones —there was a piano, for example, a real scoliotic shark of the salons, shiny black, many-toothed, with a gaping maw. I ran my hand over the keys, leaving bits of clotted mud —but no traces of that warm, woolly silence, the chord had died away before I had even lifted my hand. There were things here that I had only read about or heard from my elders —An oltyme-on stood by the staircase on the first floor, semi-transparent, shimmering with all the colors of the rainbow, from left to right, with a form for pressing the body visible as a sinkhole in the spectrum of filtered light. I didn't have the nerve to touch it, suddenly all too aware of the crust of dirt: a shark is no angel. There were things whose name or use I didn't know, perhaps because they were not utilitarian tools but, for example, works of art, devoid of any hidden function; although one does not necessarily exclude the other. (Dictionaries came to the rescue: see under "ergonomics"). There was such a room —on the first floor, in the left wing —whose floor was not covered by carpet or rug, but by a kind of elastic mass the color of ash. The mass also covered the walls and ceiling; there were no windows here, only a second door. As soon as I entered, and my feet sank almost to my ankles, the room came alive. From the gray mass, supple stems began to sprout, stalagmites and stalactites shot up and down, tuberous bulbs began to swell in the corners... I withdrew as quickly as possible.

So the right wing. Here, I vaguely recalled from the night, a real ruin opened up. But first I came across metal steps and a narrow staircase, leading both down and up. It seemed to me that whispers came from below —was Bartholomew talking to someone? So I went down. But no one was speaking, and there wasn't a living soul in those dungeons.

The dungeons —had I gone down to the ground floor or was I already below ground level? There was the coldness of a basement here —and almost complete darkness, if not for the yellow glow emanating from the lower regions, from around the bend, where the ceiling suddenly went up, the walls to the sides, and there was a cave, a semicircular nave, partly surrounded by a ring of old bricks, partly —by rock rubble. Heck, not only rock rubble lay there, piled up two, three meters high, I also noticed fragments of various equipment, remains of some electronic devices (I recognized a keyboard, the casing of a large speaker, a radio), even books —but I was really looking in the opposite direction, into the light.

Another inexplicable work of art? I thought as I stepped into its glow. It washed over me in a soft wave, and I could almost feel the sticky warmth beneath the armor of grime. I stood there, transfixed by the slow rays, staring at the wall structure, a tapestry of glass tubes filled with liquid light. It had the color of young honey, but it varied in shades in the individual sleeves (lighter, darker, sharper, milder, red-shifted, white-shifted), but because the tubes were so intertwined and ended abruptly, in invisible partitions, passing into another —the eye got lost, the gaze fell into Moebius loops, color veiled color, and I stayed there, bent over, with my arms slung like a bear along my hips, and fell deeper and deeper into a stupefying state of bliss, until I probably would have fallen asleep standing there, if she hadn't spoken from the entrance:

"Light Organs."

"What...?" I jerked my head, tearing myself out of this half-sleep.

"That's what my uncle says they are: Light Organs."

I blinked, trying to see her in the shadow.

"Where is he?"

"In the garden. What was with the mirrors?"

"Did you see what happened last night? Where am I? Could I borrow a horse, would you?"

"Come on."

We emerged from the basement. The heels of her high-top boots clattered sharply on the steel stairs; following her closely, I could smell the pungent sweat, horse's and probably her own. Her red hair was braided into a short braid. She introduced herself: Shanna Ratche. The old man in the dressing gown who owned the house was her uncle, Bartholomew.

"How did you find me there?"

We were upstairs now. She laughed, pointing to the floor.

"Oh, yes." I suddenly became all too aware of my nakedness beneath the camouflage of dry mud, which, to top it off, crumbled with every movement.

"Here," she pointed, stopping in front of a door in a side corridor.

A bathroom. Running water into the tub (something howled and squeaked in the pipes, the gilded fittings kept resonating), I searched through the cabinets, finally finding a faded, brown dressing gown. Bartholomew's, no doubt about it.

I plunged into the boiling water. The water immediately turned dark. I tilted my head back. The patterns of cracks in the ceiling plaster formed anatomical sketches in my mind —a dog, a bird, a horse, a human... What had happened to them in the night? They had survived; they had certainly managed to escape. But where had they gone next? Home? Or had they turned back to the Market? They would eventually return home to the farm anyway, so that was the most sensible place to head....

There was nothing to dry myself with, except for some torn rag; still damp, I wrapped myself in the dressing gown. But first I took another look at my body, now free of the mask of mud. No traces, only clean skin, suitably elastic to the touch and sensing correctly. However, the images from the night were too terrifying for me to get rid of my fear so easily.

The bathroom had a small window. It faced the back of the manor. This was where the garden was. In fact, it was a field of several hectares, divided for growing various types of vegetables —I could recognize some even from here: tomatoes, cabbage. An orchard surrounded the field from the right wing of the building. There, in the shade of the trees, I caught the movement of a human figure out of the corner of my eye. Bartholomew? Perhaps he was hiding in the shadow of the manor itself, now, in the morning, was very deep —and I couldn't look down vertically.

Shanna wasn't in the corridor —it was hard to expect her to be waiting by the bathroom door. I went down to the ground floor. The back exit should be somewhere here. My bare feet clapped wetly on the floor, then sank into the carpet; my dressing gown was too big, so I rolled up the sleeves, they swallowed my hands completely.

I found my rifle first: it was leaning against the wall in the corner of the hall. The hall turned here, leading out through wide-open double doors onto a narrow, stone patio, from where there were only four steps —and the black earth of the garden underfoot. After a dozen or so steps, something pricked

my heel. Hissing, I hopped on one leg. That's how Bartholomew found me, returning from the orchard with a basket full of oranges. He was wearing denim trousers and a large straw hat. He laughed loudly at the sight of me, and only then did I realize how old he must be —when the skin of his face created an engraving in a smile thicker than fingerprints; when the wrinkled turkey under his chin quivered.

He invited me in, but then changed his mind and we ate breakfast on the patio, at a plastic table, on plastic chairs. I stroked the material with the back of my hand.

He didn't ask directly, but I told him about the night and how I ended up with him anyway.

"As you can see, I'm a coward," I said, spreading butter on the bread.

"I guess so," he muttered instead of denying it. Only then did I blush.

"Will you lend me a horse?" I asked after a moment, not looking up.

"I live here by myself. I only have one old gelding," he nodded to the right wing, the one in ruins. "When would you bring him back?"

"Two, three days. Four at most; it depends on how old."

"Maybe Shanna will lend you hers, talk to her."

"Doesn't she live here?"

"No" he shook his head, smiling crookedly. "My family sent her to check on how I survived the night."

"It seems you were lucky. At least the building looks undamaged."

He was still shaking his head.

"You told me that it crawled all over you, but you were already clean to me."

"It seems I finally scraped it off."

"Look at the ground along the way. You can easily see the remains; each Perversion leaves a layer of necrosis. But only about a mile from the manor,

never closer."

I frowned. "Why?"

He leaned back in his chair, raising his face to the blue.

"Just like the Covenant, there are also various private agreements. This one is even older than the Covenant."

Was he telling the truth? The Perversions themselves were a breach of the Covenant.

"Yet Shanna came to check on you."

Bartholomew shrugged and echoed my thoughts in response:

"It wouldn't be the first time they'd broken their word."

THE stable was in an annex of the ruined wing, and that's where I found Shanna. She was brushing her mare, a two-year-old as black as night; I recognized the Zapartisans' mark.

In the meantime, I changed into a linen trousers and linen shirt given to me by Bartholomew; the only shoes that fit were sandals. I stepped carefully on the old straw covering the uneven floor of the stable.

"What kind of covenant does your uncle have?"

"Covenant? Oh, yeah." She brushed her hair back from her forehead and pointed her thumb up. "He's an astronomer."

"What?"

"You know, he's a..."

"I know what an astronomer is," I snapped.

She gave me a quick look and pursed her lips.

I stood there for a moment, confused, then sat down on a crate against the wall. Shanna finished with one side of the mare and started brushing the other.

She didn't look in my direction. I was looking out through the open gate myself, the sun piercing my pupils, burning my eyes; the bright morning forced me to lower my head. "Wolves" I mumbled. "Wild dogs. A lion would do. A fiery dragon."

"Hmm?"

"How else do you calm yourself? You have to get back on the horse you fell off as soon as possible; repeat what you let yourself down in. I'm still shaking a little. It's stupid, I know. Damn."

"Night."

"Yes."

"Come on, anyone would be scared."

"I guess so. But that's not the point. After all... Never mind." I looked back at Shanna. "Will you lend her to me? That old man" I pointed to the gelding with my gaze "would faint at the first trot."

She shook her head. She put away the brushes, tied up the mare, went to the bucket to wash her hands.

"Then I'd be stuck here. At home they'd think something happened to my uncle and me. I said that I'd be back today."

"That's great."

She rolled up her shirt sleeves and leaned over the bucket. Her red hair fell over her face.

"Where did that come from?" She had a scar on her right forearm, long and ugly.

"My first fall. I was so small." She showed her hand, almost lowering it to the ground. "Then someone predicted that a horse would kill me." She smiled at me unexpectedly. "So of course I ride whenever I can."

I smiled back.

"When I asked for a fortune-telling of my death, the fortune-teller was so

terrified by the answer that I still don't know what he saw."

"He didn't say?"

"No."

"He probably figured out that he was the one who would kill you." She wiped her hands vigorously. "Listen, this is what we'll do. I'll go home today, tell them what and how, and tomorrow morning I'll be back here, I'll bring you a good mount."

"Thanks."

She tapped me on the shoulder as she passed.

I watched her against the sun. Thin legs, back straight, shoulders back, head high, hair on fire. How old is she, fourteen? Probably even younger.

SHE left after dinner. It was already getting dark. When I went out in front of the house, I saw the eastern horizon under a bank of dark clouds —today, however, they were ordinary storm clouds. The wind blew from the west, driving them away from us, and soon a clear and bright night sky, a million stars and an angry moon were revealed above the plain of tall grass. Turning away from it, I caught a flash of light and a patch of red moving above the ruined wing.

I entered through the main hall, the first floor and that metal staircase; the house stood dark and quiet. There was no attic, I immediately emerged onto the terrace, partly covered by the jagged remains of a load-bearing wall, two-thirds of which had sunk by half a story —but on the one-third that remained intact rose a massive structure of steel and plastic. Bartholomew sat next to me, in a low, high-backed chair, folds of faded red flowing down to the floor, wrinkling anew every time he pulled up his dressing gown, lifting a bulging demijohn to his lips. But even when he took it away from his lips, he left his head tilted back, the back of his head resting on the backrest. He blinked; the stars winked at him.

He must have heard me, because he waved his free hand to the corner of the ruin, where an overturned wicker armchair lay. I moved it under the structure and sat down. Only then did it dawn on me: it was a telescope.

"Astronomer," I muttered, remembering Shanna's words.

He pulled himself up lazily in the chair.

"Look," he said, straightening his arm and tilting the large, black board attached to the machine toward us. The board immediately lit up with stars. They trembled, flickered and swam slightly sideways until he touched another module and the image stabilized. "Marsidae," he said. "We see them at an angle, and shortly after dusk, so we look partly at the side surfaces, unlit; this is not the maximum brightness of the Belt."

"How do you tell which are planetoids and which are stars?"

"You mean, without magnifying more? By relative motion. They have retained the total momentum of Mars, and although some of its larger debris has entered more eccentric orbits, the Sword and the Spur are intersecting the Second Belt, for example —ninety percent of the small stuff is moving evenly."

"How much can I magnify?"

"Show you Jupiter? Venus is probably still there..."

So it began. The telescope (looking more like a coffin on an asymmetrical scaffolding) rotated slowly above us, creaking, crunching and rattling. Master Bartholomew chatted lazily, drawing out his vowels and stopping at odd places to take a sip from his demijohn, or for no apparent reason. The cool wind carried familiar smells (of earth, grass...). Everything fell into place —each subsequent minute was so obvious that it seemed more like dreamed than experienced. He showed me how to set the right ascension and declination, how to control the magnification. I almost pressed my nose to the screen. But there was a way to have more intimate contact: an eyepiece in an elastic clamp, detachable from the plastic clasp on the casing. Bartholomew taught me how to stick it into the eye socket and how to tear it away from the skin. Now all I had to do was sit comfortably, relax my muscles, close the other eye —and I left Earth. Bartholomew kept talking, increasingly incoherently, making less and less sense. He offered me warm apple pie. He manipulated the telescope when I wasn't looking —that is, when I was looking —moving me in fluid arcs across the sky: star, planet, star, asteroid, star, Moon... Those lunar storms, yellow, red and blue atmospheric vortices, cloud constellations —great movement, almost motionless because of their size in such a distant gaze... Until I braced myself

against the cold floor, having lost my balance in the armchair, suddenly pushed harder by the lunar gale.

Master Bartholomew traced their shapes on the screen with his bony finger.

“This here... the whole complex... a month already. It comes from the pole, devoured the southern front. Some equations... As it was last night: unpredictable problems, when they break free... See inside the crater, how they wrap... They don’t know any Covenants on the Moon. They only eat each other, storm after storm. Then the fortune teller sees these flowers of chaos...”

“Beautiful.”

“Superstitions.”

“Untrue? These correlations. Move a little to the left.”

”What correlations? Relationships always exist, a person will find them one way or another. But cause and effect?”

“I don’t know. After all, you see, they do affect us. How do you know what this storm really means? Because it means something.“

“But not for us, my dear, not for us. Besides, how do you imagine that? That they have nothing better to do than model the Earth? A model that would reflect the original with one hundred percent fidelity would have to be its perfect copy.”

“You don’t have to model the whole thing to predict changes in some aspects, because I know independent parts....”

“Who taught you, boy? Your pastor?”

“To read and write? Alone, mostly; but also family, a little bit, as is the case with children....”

“Don’t you think that people are somehow different from stones, planets or stars? It’s more complicated, for sure. But does the degree of complexity matter here at all?”

“Complicated...” Bartholomew grimaced, rubbing the pads of his thumb and forefinger together, as if trying to crush invisible matter between them.

“If only the degree of complexity were a problem...”

”Aren’t you cold by any chance?”

”I could do this until morning. If you’ll allow me...”

“Have fun, please. Nice weather.”

He left, leaving me alone with the night. I finally fell asleep, somewhere between Jupiter and Saturn.

All that was left of Worm was a bloody skeleton, a saddle, a harness, and a wrinkled cloak of black leather. The ground around it was ploughed and loosened within a radius of a dozen or so meters. I dismounted Amarant to take it in my hand, to feel it under my fingers —but it was soil like any other. I didn’t notice any signs of life in it —insects, plants —but that didn’t have to mean anything either.

”Crystals or iron...” I mumbled. ”Nothing here.”

”Maybe deeper,” suggested Shanna.

I shrugged and jumped back onto Amarant.

I tried to find the place of the night attack on us by following the traces of the caravan. There were no traces. We circled for a while, finally I gave up; it was almost noon, time to go back to the farm. Shanna, whose house was by no means on the opposite side of Bartholomew’s manor, stayed with me for a while longer.

“I think he liked you” she said.

“Bartholomew? I don’t think so.”

“I think so.”

“I made a concert idiot of myself there.”

She giggled. For the first time now she really looked her age, as she laughed like that, without parting her lips, in a girlish (childish) way, turning her face away from me, and at the same time trying to watch my face and reaction to

her laughter from the side.

“Oh, maybe that’s why.”

“There’s not much entertainment in this remote area, a clown will always do.” (She giggled again). “Why does he live alone?”

“I don’t know. He’s always lived alone. I mean, since I can remember. Before that, maybe... I don’t know.”

“You’re afraid for him. It’s his private Covenant... isn’t it?”

“Well, it’s probably true. Oh gosh!”

Then we reached the body of the earth snake. The coils of green flesh rose above the surface of the earth, it died with its head bitten somewhere into the sun-baked ground —here the grass did not hide it, the horses’ hooves crushed the sandy fossils. Traces of crushing from below, however, led from the north; here they ended.

At first we thought it was still alive. Two arches of green flesh, over a meter high, motionless —that was it. She could not know if it had died.

”What a beast,” she gasped in admiration, leaning in the saddle. Before I could stop her, she stretched out her arm and touched the creature’s scaly skin. ”Almost cold. Brrr. Disgusting.” She wiped her hand on her trousers.

We circled the carcass several times. The sun was at its zenith, Shanna shielded her eyes with her open hand, the freckles on her cheeks marked the border of the shadow. Finally—it was inevitable—she caught my eye, when I was staring at her instead of the snake. I didn’t look down. She smiled broadly, her hand still raised.

We grinned at each other over the Monster’s corpse, the horses standing still as if by magic. A minute? Two? Unblinking; foolish joy on our faces. Until Amarant sneezed, stepped back, and she dropped her hand.

No one died, but Elder Leon’s leg was bitten off. He would sit on the veranda of the back lean-to, the cut-off trouser leg revealing a thickly bandaged stump. Leaning it on a high chair, he would lift it toward the sky. ”Good

for the circulation," he would say. He would not let go of the bottle in his fist. After taking a deep sip, he would tilt his head toward the Sun and drawl through clenched teeth: "Now Leon is wagging his little fingers." This and other things would not let me forget my behavior that night, although I was convinced that no one attached any importance to it, and besides —did anyone even remember when I left the caravan? Only Larisa, I think. Everyone scattered, sooner or later; everyone was saving their own skin. Was this supposed to be evidence only of my exceptional sensitivity —even an oversensitive conscience —that I saw in a simple reflex at a moment of confusion an act of some metaphysical cowardice...? A hypochondriac of the soul. But then Elder Leon would get drunk again and I would think to myself: "I'm not them. I shouldn't have." Larisa would look at me questioningly. I would break away from the farm on any pretext.

One was all too good: Amarant's return. Two Sundays after Perversion I went with him to Bartholomew's manor: a day's journey there and back. Having arrived in the evening, I found the old man asleep in a hammock in the orchard. Having come to, he seemed pleased with my visit, if I could correctly read his mood through the veil of ironic maxims and overly broad smiles. He had a very expressive face and directed its grimaces with full premeditation. By associating with such people, we involuntarily become connoisseurs of Form, cryptologists of pseudo-random behavior, directors of sighs and blinks —and already, a small Observer, a tireless prompter and critic, was beginning to grow in the back of my head. "These evening frosts are suspiciously sharp." "No worse than in the last decade, as I have heard" I reply, and that "as I have heard" is pronounced in a descending cadence, on a long exhalation, with an appropriate bow of the head.

After dinner, we somehow wandered out to the terrace, under the telescope. Bartholomew was smoking a pipe, his right shoulder resting on the massive structure. The new moon, the dark night, the red glow in the bowl... He pointed to individual stars and constellations with it, naming them one by one. He was not drunk; neither was I. His voice was now deep, strong, worthy of a preacher. I sat down on the arm of the chair. My neck ached a little from constantly turning my head to follow Bartholomew's shoulder and pipe.

He paused to answer my questions.

"Science? What kind of science can be practiced? What could I possibly

discover? What truths are yet to be discovered? Even if I did, would it really be sensible? I don't think the consensus on that issue has changed."

I told him about the ideologues from the Market.

"So you see for yourself. You shouldn't be fooled by the language and intention with which the books were written, which I have no doubt you read a lot. It's true that I retain a certain amount of knowledge and cultivate customs born from the ways in which I acquired it —more or less in the same way that cooks retain the memory of traditional recipes and cultivate kitchen superstitions. But I don't even have the illusion of utility that is theirs. It's the memory of a certain lifestyle... a certain model of humanity."

So, are there no more questions? No absolute secrets?

"Oh, of course, there are, there are. For example, the mystery of Dark Matter, huge masses of unknown nature, whose existence results only from the equations of the density of the universe, because it is impossible to 'see' it. According to the last official estimates, the records of which have been preserved, more than twenty percent of the mass was still missing, and this despite the significant weighting of some elementary particles, or the revision of the Hubble constant. But the answers to these riddles are also completely beyond our capabilities. So what can I offer you? Only starry nights and beautiful tradition, and that sense of fulfillment, the satisfaction of knowledge for knowledge's sake."

He held out his hand to me, and I stood up and shook it, bowing slightly. When the Observer finally allowed me to smile (a pinch of irony, two pinches of joy), Master Bartholomew was looking at the stars again.

III

WHAT is the origin of this feeling? Is it not jealousy? A vague longing at the sight of other people's children? A tormenting image —at first evoked with a condescending smile —of myself as a father? Of course, also satisfaction —from possession, or rather from belonging. Of course, also genetic mechanisms, so much stronger in women. Of course, also the fear of death.

But at that moment another fear took over me, the fear that I would not cope —and a sense of guilt because of the deception I was committing. The deception seemed to me unmistakable as I accepted Susanna's red body from Aunt Joanna's wet hands. I was brazenly impersonating, pretending to be someone I was not; at any moment the usurpation was to take revenge on me, I already sensed unmasking and punishment. In the meantime, my daughter began her first cry in my arms. Twenty-two years – I stopped belonging to myself, my point of reference changed, my image of myself, even my way of thinking – in that minute, when miniature fingers clung to the sleeve of my shirt.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Shanna muttered, rising in her bed, still with a grimace of pain on her face.

"They always do!" laughed my aunt. Her twin sister opened the windows, letting the air of the autumn afternoon into the bedroom. The windows in this wing of the manor opened directly onto the orchard, the slightest breeze made a million leaves rustle and rustle there.

The door creaked, Bartholomew stuck his head in.

"A girl," her aunt informed him.

"Maybe you'd better sit him down before he faints," he advised, looking at me more closely through his glasses.

I gave Susanna to Shanna. She caught my gaze. I was also looking at someone else —not that skinny girl with cowgirl manners and a cheeky smile.

ORANGES. It was my fifth or sixth visit to Master Bartholomew, a few months after the Night of Perversion; I had been staying at the manor for longer periods, up to a week. That morning, I was sitting on the patio peeling oranges, their scent permeating the air, almost coloring the light. Shanna had only just arrived. She appeared on the patio suddenly, still in her riding boots and jacket, all dirty; she was brushing her hair back from her face with the back of her hand. She smelled it immediately. "Hmm, blessed are those who feed the thirsty," she murmured, leaning over the table. She clasped her hands behind her back and grabbed a quarter of the fruit with just her lips and teeth. "What?" she muttered defensively, glancing at me. I said nothing. I selected another orange wedge and raised it to her lips. She hesitated for two, three seconds with her lips half-parted, then suddenly jerked her head up and suddenly – like those tricks Grandpa Maurice used to amuse children – my hand was empty again. Shanna tilted her head like a bird, still bent, smiling mischievously, then licked her lips: the tip of her tongue appeared and disappeared, a flash of moist red that made my throat constrict. "What?" she repeated. I chose the next quarter.

A comb, a brush, golden hair. She wore it long anyway, but soon after she stopped cutting it. It began to flow down her back, to her shoulder blades and lower. Sometimes, in the evening I would see her combing it vigorously; rarely, usually she did it in her room. Besides, she didn't often stay overnight at her uncle's: two, three times a month she would bring him things from her family, sometimes in a cart – then she would stay longer. It would seem that our simultaneous visits should therefore be a statistical improbability —but somehow things worked out differently. So, on a stormy night, after spending several hours poring over negatives of skyscapes, I saw her in the drawing room, bundled up completely in one of Bartholomew's half-acre dressing gowns, absently brushing her hair. Flipping it over her left shoulder, she squinted out the window with her right eye, into a night of rain and lightning, and did not notice me even when I sat down on the sofa next to her. A cold dampness hung

in the air. Only one oil lamp was burning, the electrical system was switched off during storms; so every object had its light and dark side, separated by a soft, quivering terminator (I had not yet returned from space). That light, the rhythmic movement of her hand, and the sound of the rain... I was tired, I dozed off. Briefly: the brush fell from her hand, the knock woke me up, I picked it up instinctively. Shanna caught me with a glance in mid-gesture. Something had to be done – the arm remembered the habits of childhood with Larisa, and I was still too distracted to stop it, and I allowed it to reach Shanna's head, to run the brush through her hair. At first she pulled away, but I repeated it, once, twice, three times, and by the fourth time she was already positioning her head at the right angle to the brush, involuntarily pressing against it slightly. By then the Observer at the back of my skull was already fully awake. Under his watchful gaze I would not have initiated this ritual for the world, not even to pick up the brush; but then I was no longer able to interrupt it. I controlled every single movement, my breathing and position on the sofa, and the distance between us; I recorded each image to the last detail: retouched with flickering light, the only visible fragment of her cheek was the continent of an unknown planet, her fingers tangled in her dressing gown —unexpectedly spied meteor streams, the shadow of her shoulder —a distant nebula, the eye looking through her hair —the brief flash of a supernova. I was to study these phenomena later with lazy fascination, with a truly scientific distance. "Are you counting?" she purred. "A hundred and a hundred." "You count." "Hmm, as if you were practicing." "I have a sister." "Ah." Lightning cracked. Neither of us even flinched. With my other hand I brushed her hair away from her neck, it seemed to me to be softer, shinier to the touch after each stroke of the brush. Sometimes, a finger would slide over the skin of her neck itself, it was warm, the blood pulsating in the artery above her collarbone. (From then on, she always came to the salon to do her hair, and when I found her there, she would hand me the brush and turn her back, tilting her head. But not a single word was said between us about this habit.) Then I returned to the maps.

"But what do you actually see in this?" she asked with some irritation in her voice, having caught me one afternoon poring over one of Master Bartholomew's books.

"In what?"

"In the stars. You know..."

I shrugged. "I'm interested in it," I said cautiously. But then I overcame myself, straightened up, and looked openly. "Have you ever looked at the night sky? Calmly, for a long time, in silence, in solitude. Didn't you get a shiver?

"Well, but this isn't about the night sky, is it? What are you reading?"

"Thermodynamics."

"That's not about the sky, is it?"

"In a way. It all depends on the object of initial fascination, then it's a matter of temperament, I think. If you start with the stars... Why does one twinkle and the other not? Why are they more or less bright? Which of them are farther away, which are closer, and what are these distances? Why are they like this and not otherwise? What is and what could be; and what is not visible. How was it in the beginning? How will it be in the end? Question after question, you encompass the entire universe and every field. Do you understand what I mean?" I made strange gestures with my hands over the book, trying to show the inexplicable. Shanna looked at me with great seriousness in her wide-open eyes. "Like-like-like a child's puzzle: every time you add a piece, a place for a new one appears, and you look for it, and so on ad infinitum, each element equally necessary; and this image that emerges, this image, this image..." I gesticulated again senselessly, stammering.

"Then what" she finally said "will you and uncle sort it out?"

This was a question that returned in one form or another in every other conversation I had with Master Bartholomew.

"My dear, you know very well that it is impossible" he concluded. "These books were written from a level of knowledge and technology much higher than anything we could have hoped for. Later, by the way, the level rose even higher; but They do not write books. Besides, what kind of 'discovery' are you talking about? Would anyone pay attention to them at all, apart from the two of us? When you read such a textbook, you make discoveries on every page —discoveries only for yourself, but that is half of all those interested. In the end, does not the whole thing boil down to personal satisfaction? In every field, the best remains undervalued —by definition: because there is no one who could truly appreciate them. I told you: this is not scientific work —it is a lifestyle."

Indeed, he did say it, he often repeated it. I began to understand what he meant. When I was with him, my sleep cycle shifted to late night hours —I went to bed before dawn, got up in the afternoon. I ate once a day: with him, at dusk, usually on the patio, if the weather was good. During the day I read; at night I watched. The regularity and peculiar simplicity of this life meant that very quickly time spent at Bartholomew's manor very quickly —because from day to day —converged in my memory into one memory swallowing its own tail. Memory like a multi-circular epicyclical machine: a small daily rotation, a larger one —connected with Shanna's visits, the largest —astronomical. Consequently, the moments of conjunction were most strongly imprinted.

The telescope. On the night of the comet, Shanna went up to the terrace, curious about the phenomenon. In my right eye, I had a dark constellation and the white-yellow tail of an ice bolide; in my left —Shanna's bright face, leaning toward the starry table. I told her about the habits of the sky. She touched the image of the comet with her fingertip, as if it were an unknown animal. I wanted to move in the armchair to make room for her, but somehow we couldn't get along – I was half-blind, she was staring too – and finally she sat on my lap. At first, on my left thigh, that is, but gradually we sank into the most comfortable position for both of us: slight changes in the center of gravity, muscle tension, even deeper breaths... When the comet disappeared below the horizon, Shanna was already asleep, her head resting on the back of the armchair over my shoulder, her leg thrown over the armrest, her hair on my shirt. She fell asleep – and at first I was terrified, I froze completely, not so much from fear of waking her: she had fallen asleep in the arms of a stranger – and the sheer amount of trust she showed me in this way was terrifying. Did I turn as pale then as I had on the day Susanna was born? Quite possibly. I sat petrified, a nerve-twisting current circulating beneath my skin—excitement? Irritation? Fear? Or something else. It was getting colder, wild animals were calling to each other in the distance, clouds were obscuring the stars. I wouldn't wake her for anything in the world. I didn't. There was a bang, a dry crack—we both jumped. But it was the telescope lens that had broken.

"And what's to be done? Such things happen."

"Can you fix it? Do you have spare parts?"

"Of course not." Bartholomew glanced in surprise over his glasses. "I thought

you were familiar with, hmm, the customs."

In fact, I was to understand them only after some time, when father decided that it was time to acquaint me with the Council's activities. It was also on this occasion that Larisa and Shanna met for the first time. They were almost the same age, but for some reason, until then I had always thought of Larisa as much older.

That day I was weeding in Bartholomew's garden (he was increasingly using my help); Bartholomew had locked himself away somewhere, or had gone for a long walk; he was in one of his solitary moods. Larisa had to go through the entire manor looking for me before she found the back exit. I was at the other end of the garden, half hidden behind the bean poles, in full sunlight. My wide-brimmed hat protected me from stroke, but it also limited my field of vision, enclosing me in a globe of shadow. I didn't notice Larisa, she didn't notice me. Only when I got up did I see them talking on the edge of the building's shadow, their profiles turned toward me. Suddenly everything regained its proper proportions: Larisa, Shanna, me, Bartholomew's manor, my presence in it. Two worlds that had been separated from each other interpenetrated each other, were reduced to a common denominator, and now I saw Shanna through the eyes of my farm-self (somewhat uglier, older, with a shadow of sadness on her face) and Larisa through the eyes of my manor-self (why was she so amused? Why was she twirling her hair around her finger and twisting her lips?). I stood there for a long time and watched them; they were talking. I don't know what —when I approached, they fell silent, turning to me.

"Did something happen?"

"No, no," Larisa quickly reassured me. "Dad wants you at the Market."

"What's so sudden? Should I go now?"

"Nowaway. Get going. We're going directly to the Market."

"It's pointless. Maybe at least..."

"You know our father."

In an instinct I couldn't understand, I exchanged a look with Shanna. She made a silly face, wrinkling her nose and frowning. I puffed out my cheek. Larisa just cleared her throat, looking away.

During the ride, she didn't bring up the subject either, not a word about Shanna, Bartholomew. By then, I was already going there regularly, almost every other week. We didn't talk about it much. It was a tradition to divide one's life into two or three centers at a certain point —and then reduce them to one option after a few years. Of course, there were exceptions, like Daniel —those who never made up their minds completely. What determined the choice of these centers, points of concentration? Coincidence, like in my case? The Market was much more common.

There were few people at the Market at the time, only two tents were standing, including one by the Crypt: the "Council Tent" as they called it. We found two old men and my father there. He was sitting at a stone table (part of a ruin) and writing something in a notebook. I knew one of the old men: Joseph Bucher, from the eastern grain farms. The other, completely bald, with a gray beard, was dozing, leaning against the wall of the tent. I assumed that was why my father quickly led me outside so as not to wake him; Larisa returned to the horses.

My father stood in the shadow of the Crypt, with his hands folded behind his back, and straightened up. I then experienced a flash of true Understanding: I understood that he must have imagined this moment many times and had planned it precisely —the place, time, gestures and words.

"We don't understand each other well." Thus he began, and a shiver ran through me. "We never understood each other well," he said and looked away; from now on he would speak, looking somewhere into the afternoon sky. "I think you are too much like me, you are too much of me, for any sincere understanding to be possible between us. Because I am no longer talking to a child, am I? Not to a child. Nevertheless, you are my son and I love you." Here he was almost whispering. "Maybe one day you will understand this kind of love... We don't understand each other well, but since we are so similar —I know I can trust you; that..." He let out a loud breath from his lungs. "Come on."

We went down to the Vault.

It was a ruin, but with every step into it and down the wide stairs, toward white, sharp light—with every step it grew younger, retreating in time. Until we entered a hall preceded by a short vestibule, and I saw the luxury of the old world.

I didn't realize how rough, ragged, worn, dirty, and imperfect everything around me was – until I saw this perfection. A place of perfect things: perfect cleanliness; perfect, monochromatic, shadowless light; a perfectly smooth table and chairs; a perfectly green carpet; wainscoting with perfectly even panels. The table and chairs were the only furniture. The table was long, bare and empty, and at the opposite end sat a black-haired young man in a perfectly white shirt, with a face with perfectly symmetrical features. He was smoking a cigarette, leaning his elbow on the table. He watched us lazily through the smoke. When we approached, he smiled and held out his hand. It didn't take me long to realize that I was supposed to shake it. His skin was perfectly pink, unblemished.

"Their representative," my father told me, as if the other one couldn't hear. "He has no name."

"But I do have..." the dark-haired one said (in such a melodious voice) "...I have names, many. Choose one."

"We've done without them so far and it's better to keep it that way" Father cut him off.

"When will you finally finish the list?" the Nameless One turned to him, blowing smoke.

"Ariel of the Hills isn't here yet; you know that very well."

"You, boy" the black-haired one returned his gaze to me "wouldn't you like something special on the occasion? Something you've only seen in books so far?"

"Stop it!" the father snapped.

Now it was the Nameless One who hadn't heard him.

"Or maybe some books, books that are no longer there?" he continued. "Or maybe a little present for the lovely Shanna? Something she'll never forget?"

It chilled me a little, I admit.

"I like your shirt" I said slowly.

"Let's go!" Father tugged at my arm, glaring at the dark-haired man.

As I was leaving, I looked back, and he was still sitting there, staring into space through the smoke, alone in the large, bright hall.

Back in the sun, back in the land of weakness. It didn't take long for us to recover.

"I've been officially introduced, huh?" I mumbled.

"Shivers run down one's spine, hmm?" He sighed loudly. "They always tempt, it's in Their nature. They'll promise you anything. If they lied, it would be easy to resist then; but They keep their word. We can't give in. By deciding what goes on these lists and what doesn't, we shape the lives of tens of thousands. The fate of the Country is in our hands."

I instinctively looked back at the entrance to the Vault.

"They can hear us, can't they?"

He nodded.

"They always can. The only strategy can be truth against an opponent who is so much more powerful and so much more cunning."

It all sounded suspicious to me. He was trying too hard to convince me. He was so ostentatiously honest...

The Observer was pushing ironic retorts into my mouth; but I held back.

"An opponent?" I only grimaced. "If we start thinking like that... Paranoia. These lists... What is this supposed to be?"

He led me back to the Council Tent. Joseph was gone; the bald old man was snoring loudly. Father opened his notebook, I leaned over. The entire first page was taken up by lists and descriptions of glass in various forms, mainly intended for window panes and dishes.

"There is a certain limit to the size of the population and the level of technology involved," he said quietly, "which are required to make the continuous production of certain materials, machines, chemicals —not so much profitable as possible at all." Our community is too small to manufacture most electrical appliances, medicines or even glass products; not to mention more complicated things. Minerals and spices also come into play here —pepper, for example; we

don't extract or precipitate salt from sea water ourselves; sugar from southern farms is of poor quality... Of course, we could maintain the same standard of living by developing higher technologies —but that would be a sure road to hell.“

“So instead —we trade with Them. This is the height of hypocrisy.”

“What kind of trade could take place here? What could we possibly offer?” Father shook his head. “No. They simply do us favors. These are gifts.”

“The name itself is therefore a lie.” I went outside the tent. “The Market. Right!“

“But there are many mutual exchanges and money transactions between the inhabitants of the Country here. It's just that those mediated by the Council... are always more profitable for all parties.”

“Hypocrisy, hypocrisy.”

He looked at me searchingly.

“Don't be silly. You don't believe in this extremist nonsense.”

I shrugged.

“Isn't the truth that in essence —consciously or unconsciously —each of us enters into a certain agreement, a private Covenant, arbitrarily choosing the boundaries of what is permissible, what is still human, what is human —and what is not?”

“Nobody does it consciously. What kind of hypocrisy do you mean? Do you want one?”

He offered me a cigarette. We smoked in silence. The old man was snoring.

When I returned to Bartholomew, the telescope was in perfect condition again.

KOLAI, Shanna's cousin, a deeply religious man, with a tall figure and an unusually phlegmatic temperament, appeared when Shanna had once again

extended her stay at the manor. I was woken up by their quarrel: Kolai and Bartholomew. I went down to the landing and looked over the railing of the stairs. Kolai stood over the old man and jabbed his straightened finger into the air, emphasizing more accented words with a gesture.

"Do you think I don't know? Do you think I don't realize it?! You were old when Grandma Ewelina was young. You play with time. You're not human! You sold your soul for longevity and you infect others. You're a walking Perversion, Bartholomew."

"I'm not persuading her to do anything," Bartholomew replied, pressing himself even deeper into the back of the couch.

"There's no need to persuade. It's enough to set an example. Evil doesn't force itself in —we choose it because it's more attractive."

"You live in a gloomy world, Kolai."

"Forget it. Shanna. She won't visit you again."

"That's sad."

"Empty mockery. May you rot here alone!"

"Amen."

Kolai clenched his fist and seemed to strike Bartholomew, but at the last moment he stopped the blow. He turned on his heel and marched off with a long stride.

I went downstairs. Bartholomew looked back at me, lazily amazed.

"Will he really forbid her to come?" I went to the window, looked out. They were just climbing onto the wagon box, tied behind the horses. Shanna was saying something. "What do you mean, 'walking perversion'?"

"You certainly know them, those who are terrified by the fact that they are alive. He doesn't speak for the whole family. How old are you really? I will be three hundred."

"Oh! So it was!" (They were leaving). "Part of your deal?"

"No, it's a side effect of something else. The Light Organs... Oh, by the way..."

"They left."

"She'll be back."

"You're not trying to infect her. Me?"

"With what?" he laughed. "I've already infected her with curiosity. You see miracles you were previously blind to. The rest will come by itself."

"So he wasn't entirely wrong."

"Of course." He stopped laughing. "I never had children of my own."

Shanna returned two days later.

MIRACLES I had been blind to... A big word for small things; but perhaps well deserved. It all begins with surprising comparisons. If you gather a sufficiently large stock of sufficiently diverse knowledge, analogies will appear even more often than you would like; like intrusive flies, they return even if they've been chased away. Overlapping images, astigmatic overexposures, as when I look into the core of a galaxy with one eye, at Shanna's face with the other. This is how eccentric symmetries are born in the mind.

The way a gardener tends his crops, sometimes protecting them from excess sun and water, sometimes providing fertilizer —and the way They freely bestow luxury goods upon us. Cross-sectional sketches of animal's nervous systems —and sketches of the hypothetical distribution of Dark Matter filaments in the universe. The colored outline of a swelling colony of unicellular organisms —and the black Perversion on the western horizon.

My great failure was that I, in turn, was unable to infect Shanna with it. Part of my world remained inaccessible to her, I had to divide my time and fence off my thoughts. My daily routine at Bartholomew's changed again: afternoons and evenings now belonged to Shanna. We knew the dates of our stays at the manor in advance; it went without saying that they had to coincide.

So when the horse thieves' raids began and I missed two visits to Bartholomew's

in a row, chasing the bandits with others through the wastelands and wilds of the Country (it lasted about a month; we didn't catch them then anyway) —I wasn't even surprised to learn after my return that Shanna had appeared at the farm at that time to ask if I was all right. Something else had moved me.

"A very nice girl," my mother said, without looking up from the jam she was frying. "Have you thought about the wedding date?"

"You know what!" I snorted. "It's not..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Anyway, let us know in advance."

Since I had no idea what to think about it myself, I told Shanna about the conversation. I couldn't help laughing, so of course she laughed too. But then she turned over on her back and stared at the sky (we were lying in sun-baked grass, in an elongated depression in the ground behind the orchard).

"Can you imagine that?" she asked.

"What?"

"Our wedding."

The Observer panicked slightly, I could feel it thrashing around in my brain, just behind my eyes. It took me a long moment to overcome my first reflexes —the reflexes to escape into jokes, mockery and cynicism.

"I wouldn't dare" I said.

"Hmm?"

"To make such a promise to anyone. To bind that person for life. Do you understand me? —I turned my face toward her. She was still looking at the sky. It- it-it-it's like taking a hostage. For life. As if-as if I had implanted a parasite in you that..."

"A parasite??" Until she finally looked at me. "For God's sake!"

"Don't you understand?" If I weren't lying down, I'd be waving my hands

now. The curses of sudden analogies continue: we're talking about topic A, A makes me think of B, I start talking about it; I'm talking, and before I finish the sentence, B makes me think of C, C of D, D of E, and all of them with each other, and so the baroque construction grows, an abstraction explaining the world with overwhelming ease; so I try to tell it as it grows, I interrupt myself, stammer and chase the words; and while my mouth starts the second sentence, my mind is already on X, Y and Z; the original topic ceased to interest me and I finally fell silent, embarrassed, misunderstood once again. Master Bartholomew was still the furthest from my associations, then Daniel, Shanna was in third place, much lower. But with her I usually didn't feel embarrassed by her incoherent arguments. "Don't you understand? You'd have to be an angel to be able to honestly swear such an oath! I wouldn't have the courage to sentence anyone..."

"Sentence?" she interrupted me again.

I took her hand.

"There's no turning back here. There will be no second youth, no second choice, no second life. You swear and boom, it's gone. Unless someone was clairvoyant... But like this? Do you know me? Do I know you? Besides, people change. I would make myself the most important person in your life! If... You don't understand? It's terrifying!"

"Then how else? Refrain from choosing at all? No: you simply choose, assess the risks. Based on what you know; what you hope for; from those you've met... Of course, it's a lottery. But what would you like? A guarantee?"

"I'd just like to be more sure of myself."

She turned on her side, whispered in my ear:

"Everyone would run away then, believe me."

I lifted her hand to my lips, kissed the back and the grass-scented interior. She was already smiling, her eyes sparkling. The elaborate abstractions were fading with every second.

Half a year later we were married. That conversation was the closest thing to a proposal we'd said to each other before or after.

Of course I had betrayed her trust. After Susanna was born, when Shanna had become pregnant again—her sudden rudeness, her aversion to touch, her outbursts over idiotic complaints over the cries of a teething baby, the constant weariness in her eyes and body—I had gone to the Market, my father had dragged me to listen in on Council meetings; I had helped to divide the goods—she had come from the south, with her cousin, for lightbulbs and paper and medicines, she had stayed for the long market nights, when the whole ruins and the tent city pulsated with light and shadow, my head was spinning with unfamiliar faces—warm wine and warm twilight, she had laughed and run her fingertips over my face, my forearm, my chest, her joy, her obvious pleasure in my proximity—I had become addicted. Katrina; she and others. At home—Shanna; and at every sight of her—a dagger in my heart. I had betrayed her trust, as I knew I would. Guilt turned me against her: now I had no right to see any beauty in her, no goodness, now I convinced myself that she was also responsible. So I too became rude, avoided touch, provoked fights. The taste of bitterness and iron in my mouth, a wooden tongue. After all, I had warned her! I was honest. Peter was born. Titan fell apart and I named one of Saturn's new satellites after my son. Larisa was getting married. Larisa was getting married and the candidate for brother-in-law turned out to be Katrina's cousin. I immediately had a bad feeling, but it seemed unfounded. It was only one night during a spring gathering that Larisa came upon me while I was on guard at the already extinguished campfire (again there were rumors about outlaws). We gossiped about our relatives for a while. I treated her to an herbal tincture of Ratche. Finally it came down to her planned marriage. We were both already talking indistinctly, yawning and staring sleepily into the darkness. She said something about her fiancé that I didn't understand, my mind was also working at a slow pace. What? That I would shoot him in the leg if he did such dirty tricks to me. What dirty tricks? Debauchery in the shadow of the Crypt, as the Pastor would say... there's a wife with a baby and a second child on the way. How could you possibly be more dirty? I'll think of something, give me time. —(But it was the Observer speaking, not me; the Observer was grinning stupidly, I —I was cowering in silence.) I think I'll finally enlighten her. "Larisa..." "What?" she threw out with drunken aggression. I averted my eyes from her gaze. "Do you love her at all?" she asked.

"You know..."

"Hmm?"

“Tell me what you mean by that, and I’ll tell you if I love her.”

She stared at me in gloomy amazement. Straightening up and tilting her head back, she took a deeper sip of the herbal alcohol —only then did she tear her gaze away.

”What happened to you?” she asked quietly, clearing her throat. What was supposed to happen to me? What was she talking about? What did she want to know?

”These are such spaces...” I mumbled. ”Such a huge void... It freezes your bones. Remember how you hid under the stairs? I...”

She was almost asleep.

”That Bartholomew of yours...”

”What do you mean Bartholomew?”

She mumbled something, closing her eyes; again I didn’t understand.

We were woken before dawn by a tremor in the ground – a terrified herd is a small earthquake. The horses were almost galloping, we should have woken up earlier, but the alcohol had dulled our senses and slowed our reactions. Larisa was the first to jump on Flame (Flame, daughter of Fire), who had not settled down for the night, just like my Ukrop. She stood in her stirrups and, cursing, pointed to the pinking eastern horizon. “They are driving them toward the river!” Before I mounted Ukrop, she was already galloping after the herd. I rushed after her; the shadow of the speeding horse and her, stuck to its neck, was cut out against the reddening sky with a flat outline, it was a moving hole in the horizon. Something else was moving: a black wave of heads, backs and manes. What caused this avalanche? Somewhere in this mass the thieves had to be hiding. The river was not visible. The whole thing took place over an area of some six or eight square kilometers. Ukrop broke into a long gallop and then shots rang out. The noise reached me already softened, stretched out, echoed. One shot, then another, then a series of three and a short, irregular shot; four or more people were firing. I instinctively reached for my rifle. Meanwhile, the herd had turned in unison and was now almost straight at me. I jerked the reins, steering Ukrop toward a tangent. Larisa’s shadow merged with the shadow of the herd —a multi-headed stingray was gliding toward me, the thunder was

growing. I began to notice riders in this mass. One broke away and veered toward me. Larisa? They, of course, saw me much better than I saw them, looking against the light. I cocked my gun. It turned out to be Ezekiel. "Left!" he shouted. "Left! We'll take them from the other side! They're driving them away!" He passed me at a run. We went in a long arc, half-slowing down, waiting for the horse thieves to appear. Shooting broke out again, the herd pushed off from the river even further. Four silhouettes broke away from the many-headed shadow. Ezekiel tugged on the reins until his mount almost sat on its haunches. Ezekiel jumped down, took out his rifle, aimed and began to shoot. The other four stopped, but they clearly had no choice —the river to the left, the herd to the right, gunfire behind, gunfire in front, but only one man was shooting here —they immediately started again, and one even returned fire —and Ezekiel fell from the second bullet. I was just dismounting from Ukrop, one foot in the stirrup, the other in the air, a split second: they were rushing at me, Ezekiel was wheezing on the ground. Did Ukrop move and, losing his balance, I fell off the horse? Or was there some decision in it? I remember it differently. What is certain is that I stood there, raised my rifle, counted my breaths (I could already see the faces of the bandits) and after the tenth I pulled the trigger. Breath, shot, breath, shot, breath, shot. Ukrop and Ezekiel's horse ran away in fear —I could no longer escape. I stood and shot. No tremors in my hands, no desperate thoughts —only the movements of my hand and eye, the mechanics of my body. Of course they returned fire. Fifty, forty, thirty meters. Ten steps ahead of me the last one fell, I saw his eyes, wide open in mortal astonishment; the horse thief's sable passed me within arm's reach. I didn't pull it out —the cold and the trembling reached my chest, my head. I wanted to support myself with the rifle, but I lost my balance. I fell on my back, the air left my lungs. Ezekiel's dead eyes looked calmly. I turned my head. The sun was rising. Everything was red, I liked to fall asleep in that red. Those spaces...

My skin had already fooled them, and they thought I was a hero. There was no limit to the Observer's game, he began to review my every word, every gesture —after all, falsehood now stood behind every conversation, every look. A hero! I lay in our bedroom in Bartholomew's manor —a hole in my leg, a hole in my stomach, half of my body in bandages, an IV in my arm —and I received subsequent visits: the Doctor, the Pastor, my family, Shanna's family. The children looked at me with pious respect, too intimidated to come closer to the bed. The Observer was in his element.

It also seemed that new life had entered Shanna. Now I was dependent on her, now she had me under her control twenty-four hours a day, I couldn't even climb up to the telescope. What's more, she had also succumbed to the deception. "You see," she said, "it all depends on the situation; if you have time to make a decision, you don't run away. Although you probably should have." "Really? A decision? My memory had already mutated the memory of that moment a dozen times, I could not distinguish the record of naked impressions from their later imagining. What wasn't in this memory! In the end, when I was losing consciousness, in a thin cloud of red even my teenage great-grandmother Kunegunda appeared to me, in green, with a crimson rose in her black hair. So I could just as well classify the entire memory as a hallucination. Was it me who killed them, or, for example, Ezekiel who shot a bit longer?

Out of boredom, I started teaching Suzanna to read. She spent a lot of time with me anyway, and since I practically never let go of a book, questions had to come sooner or later. They were books from Bartholomew's library (I was soon to exhaust its resources) and I caught myself spelling out the names of constellations for my daughter and explaining sky sketches. Of course, she did not understand anything, but that was not important. I do remember the feeling that came over me then: that I was changing her, or rather creating her; that nothing would erase these hours spent with me now; that I was projecting certain patterns of associations, matrices of reasoning, nay! Millions of ways that adult Susana would perceive the world —the probable paths of her life —would immediately be ruled out. Not by teaching her to read— but by the way I answered her questions, how I behaved in her presence toward Shanna, Bartholomew, the family; by all the things I noticed about my father, when he thought no one noticed them; and by the subconscious embrace in which I closed Susanna in my sleep, when she dozed off on my chest—in the afternoons, warm, muggy afternoons. The sun would then stream in through the half-open window straight from the green orchard, along with all the smells and sounds of spring, equally sleep-inducing; a kind of blissful heaviness fell on people (from these colors and this semi-silence), blood thickened in the veins, thoughts in the head, and this is how one fell asleep, especially in illness, permanent fatigue of the body: mouth parted, breathing loudly, a book on the chest or on the face, open with the back upwards, bedding kicked below the waist, a child cuddled in crumpled pajamas... Because Susanna also fell asleep first, and this was a spell I could not break —the warm and soft body of a slowly breathing child. To such an extent it was an extension, an expansion of my body that I woke

up the same second Susanna opened her sleepy eyes. She did not need much either: the shadow of her mother in the doorway.

“I dreamed of you” she said, sitting on the edge of the bed. “That’s right.”

Susanna was already closing her eyes again, so we spoke in whispers.

“It almost doesn’t hurt anymore. I can walk.”

“Lie down, the stitches will come apart.”

“She’s very clever.” Shanna gently ruffled her daughter’s hair. ”She got that from you.”

I covered Shanna’s hand with mine. She leaned over me. Her eyes shone from the rays of the afternoon sun. We were lying again in that grassy hollow behind the orchard —or maybe it was the shadow of the cemetery oak...?

Bartholomew dragged his heavy feet, Susanna could already hear him in the corridor.

“Sleep, sleep” he mumbled, having peeked into the bedroom that evening. “I’ll come later.”

“What’s the matter?” I asked, rubbing my eyelids.

He hesitated, and after crossing the threshold, hesitated a second time; but finally he pulled up a chair and sat down. Susanna watched with one eye. He winked at her, rummaged in the pockets of his dressing gown, and found an apple. Instead of eating it, however, she began to play with it, rolling it all over me.

”You’ve seen the Organs of Light,” said Master Bartholomew.

”Aha.”

”How often do you stop by?”

”Because I know...”

”You should every week.” Another round of searching and another find: a pipe. He filled it, lit it. ”I was just there. The color appeared.”

"Hmm?"

"No doubt about it, a distinct coloration. As you know, I already knew over two hundred years ago..."

"Oh, yes."

"Yeah."

"Tradition, huh?"

He shrugged.

"Would you like that? Someone should. I don't see any other candidate."

I raised myself up on my elbow.

"Now?"

He shrugged again.

I took Susanna off me and sat her on the bed next to me. I stood up slowly, using my walking stick. Master Bartholomew took me by the arm. I hobbled toward the metal steps. We descended in silence, Bartholomew panting through his teeth clenched around his pipe as I leaned harder and harder on him. I felt the seam under my ribs gradually giving way.

When we rounded the bend, I saw what he was talking about: one of the Organ sleeves —long, wrapped in the shape of the letter U —was pulsating with an intense blue. The intensity of the glow emanating from it was so great that it changed the color of the light in the entire dungeon.

I sat down on the remains of a battery. Master Bartholomew reached into the hiding place under the Organ and pulled out a glass chalice. "Tradition," he smiled crookedly over his shoulder. The Observer smiled back. Master Bartholomew wiped the chalice with the flap of his dressing gown, then struck the blue pipe hard with his pipe —it broke and the blue poured into the chalice.

He handed it to me, and I accepted it and drank the luminous liquid in four sips. A little trickled down my chin, I wiped it with my forearm.

"Where...?" I cleared my throat and repeated. "Where?"

"Medusa, four hundred and fifty light years. At least that's what it says in the Organs' index, but..."

I wasn't listening any more; its radiation burned my skin, burned my eyes, x-rayed my bones, I fell into its well like a bird with a broken spine. The cold air of the starry night roared in my ears —although of course there was no air there; on the other hand, the stars...

"Reprotoxic shock!" Bartholomew shouted in my ear, trying to lift me off the floor. "Breathe!" Breathe!

I breathed.

FROM a lexicon of ancient knowledge: "reprosion" —an effect, or apparatus, using the Reinsberg/Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen effect. Pairs of reprosion particles connected at the level of quantum uncertainty remain in a zero-time coupling regardless of the distance separating them. Nothing can move faster than light —except information. Which is quite sufficient.

IV

The extensa was not much bigger than my fist at first. Although it was called a "Seed" in this form, it actually hid trillions and trillions of proper reprosion particles under its spherical shell. In the "dormant" state of minimal activity, it used several dozen micrometric octoscopes to contact the outside, piercing through the super-diamond-hard coating into the dark vacuum in winding tunnels. Based on the information from these octoscopes, internal logical structures made decisions on enforcing subsequent procedures, up to the reconfiguration of complementary particles, activating them and precipitating an alarm dye in a neutral medium. But when the complementary particles grew into a nervous system, the function of the extensa's logical network changed —from now on it would play the role of a semi-intelligent filter and interpreter of information; all decisions would come through the complementary particles. However, the filter had to learn from scratch and the first hours were torture. The terminator cut me in half —no matter how I rolled over in bed, wrapped myself in blankets, my face and torso were always on fire, the red light of Medusa (although so weak from this distance) blinded me and irritated my skin. The entire spectrum of the star's radiation beat inside me, I could almost feel my insides boiling. In addition, Medusa's gravity well had oriented itself during the coupling divergently from the direction of Earth's gravity and this constant schizophrenic labyrinth turned my stomach, brought thick acids to my throat; I couldn't turn my head, sit up without dizziness, not to mention standing on my feet —I was flying like a log, Medusa threw me on the floor and wouldn't let me get up from my knees; I crawled onto the bed like a tortured animal. That's how my first day, evening and night passed. Finally I fell asleep; restless in my sleep, I woke up Shanna many times. In the morning, I spread my wings. The extensa

had already calibrated the intensity of the transmitted stimuli for the most part and the balance had been established —that is: Medusa no longer obscured the rest of the world from me. In a literal sense, it had not done so before: the data coming from the extensa and addressed to the sense of sight were, after all, extremely sparse. I did receive the full spectrum of electromagnetic waves there, in a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree perspective, but what could those pair of micro-octoscopes actually register? They had only noticed the anomaly after passing the Oort Cloud. It was necessary to spread their wings. Besides, I would have done it anyway: in that textbook that I had found in Master Bartholomew's library a year or two earlier, it was described as the obligatory first stage. In the standard schedule, ten to thirty years were allocated for it, depending on the local purity of the vacuum. Such are the cosmic scales (such and even greater) and man cannot speed anything up here. Bartholomew was telling the truth: longevity is a side effect. Awake, but not awake, I listened to Shanna's movements in the bathroom and Peter's babbling, as well as the quiet morning rain, I savored its scent —without lifting my eyelids, falling in the cold darkness toward the red star, I tensed my dorsal extensa muscles. Slowly, slowly, the pores in the seed's skin began to open. This is where monomolecular threads will grow from the inner matter of the sphere, tens, hundreds, thousands of meters long. Invisible nets, traps for gas and cosmic dust that will spread out into the void in this way; slowly, for months, years... But the next stages will be shorter, it will go faster and faster. I arched my back, spreading my openwork wings.

"Does it hurt?"

"No, really."

"I agreed to go to the Holzes today, but I can stay..."

I lifted my eyelids. I saw her again, leaning over the bed. With her left hand she was buttoning her dress (she didn't used wear dresses, she didn't wear anything in which she couldn't immediately jump on a horse), and with her right, in a motherly gesture, she placed it on my forehead. I turned my head and kissed her wrist. She smiled instinctively.

"Bartholomew says it shouldn't hurt" she said. "That it should even help. Why didn't you wait for me?"

"You'd only worry more."

"Because you have to play with such things too! Not that I agree with Kolai —but isn't this going too far? A telescope and the night sky are different things, this is something else."

How could I tell her about extensa? I couldn't even infect her with astronomy. How to tell her about this blueness inside me? The Anomaly-induced storms of Medusa's chromosphere are flooding space with high-energy electromagnetic and corpuscular radiation, and I am being washed by a hot tsunami of solar wind as she kisses me goodbye. How will she interpret this shiver, this sudden shudder of the body? What will she understand? Such things are unspeakable.

Despite everything, I try to grab her hand, stop her, explain without the Observer's help the true nature of this next scientific ritual that Master Bartholomew has led me to. I know that once I start talking, once I start babbling something in my own way, as long as I look her in the eye and don't lose physical contact with her —I will finally be able to distill from mind to mind, from soul to soul some miasma of Truth.

So I grab her, look, open my mouth —and it bursts out:

"I've been unfaithful to you."

She tilts her head, looks unblinkingly, finally frees her hand.

"Later, later; I have to go."

She knew.

Of course she knew; how could she not? One had to listen to the Observer, always and to the letter; and me? Such carelessness backfires. So Shanna had to suspect at least. I would have suspected myself for sure.

Here a sudden reflection: really? Would I have suspected? Hadn't she given similar signs? I left —she stayed. She also went, even when she was in advanced pregnancy —to her family, to her neighbors, to some acquaintances from the coast, often spending the night there. At the time I didn't ask her any questions, in a way satisfied with the loosening of the bonds —but now it struck me with a terrible suspicion. She didn't ask either. Why? Did she understand it as a

kind of silent pact, some sick arrangement, of which she fulfilled her part with equally hysterical persistence? How exactly am I supposed to ask her about it now? How?

So I didn't ask. She didn't ask either. It turns out that I didn't say what I said; the conversation didn't take place. Shanna returned at dusk, she had been unloading a cart full of smoked meat for a long time; I somehow managed to come down, but I couldn't help her. Peter was dozing on my lap. Shanna was working, whistling a lively melody under her breath, sweat stuck to her dress, muscles were visible under the skin that was shining with it; she was strong, physically too. Wasn't that the source of her charm? I absentmindedly ruffled my son's hair, the heart of the galaxy was pulsating in a thousand-year rhythm, there was a movement inside my body. She was a beautiful woman. "The coalmen will come later this year," she said. "Hmm?" "I heard that the White and Yellow flooded." "They announced that they wouldn't keep up the weather." "You shouldn't agree to this. I mean: the Council." "We don't agree. They're simply informing us." "Oh, nice" she muttered, carrying another box into the house "just wait until they inform us that the Green Country is going under the ocean's surface."

I understood that my morning confession would never be mentioned; I would never learn the truth either.

It was getting colder, I carried Peter to his bed. I moved without pain, the sickly stiffness in my limbs gradually disappeared and I did not lose my breath after climbing the stairs. Over the next four or five days, the blue washed the last traces of the gunshots from my body. Shanna commented on this with salty irony. Her comments on my sudden domesticity were less ironic. Apart from Council meetings and periodic visits to the family farm, I practically never left the manor. The extensa was growing, I was already reaching for kilometers perpendicular to the direction of flight, my wings were getting thicker with each captured atom, each transmuted lump of contaminated ice, a cloud of free gas. A week after Peter's second birthday, a two-meter wide meteor passed through me, punching a hole and tearing the structure of the wing. I was pruning a branch of an old apple tree when the blow knocked me off the ladder. I twisted my ankle, bruised my hip, my brutally torn flesh burned like living fire, the pain traveled along miles of nerves, my black wings trembled in long convulsions as I lay there in the speckled shade of the orchard, my mouth wide open greedily swallowing the crimson light of Medusa. Master Bartholomew

found me, picked me up, led me to the hammock. "Lie down. Don't move. Let it heal." I the remembered his days of solitude, what we took for attacks of senile introversion; I remembered his various incomprehensible behaviors, from sudden mood changes, incomprehensible reactions, sentences broken off in mid-sentence, to all those overexpressive facial expressions, absurd gestures. Without knowing his extensa, all we can learn about another person is the frequency of occurrence of individual phenomena of word and body, nothing more.

Even if no radiant blue had ever tainted his blood —imaginary extensa, extensa of dreams and unfulfilled desires are an equally integral part of it. The night sky is clouding over and I return from the telescope earlier —Shanna rolls over on her side in the kicked-up sheets, her eyeballs are going crazy under her eyelids, her breathing quickens, her fingers tighten on the sheet —what is she dreaming? What will she remember from this dream? Most likely nothing. Yet she will be gloomy and silent all day —or exceptionally joyful and smiling for no reason. Even if I asked and she wanted to answer honestly... it won't do anything, it won't explain anything. Such things are unspeakable.

Meanwhile, I continued to fall toward Medusa, growing in geometric progression, because the deeper in the ecliptic plane toward the star, the less pure the vacuum and the more space debris in my wings, and therefore the longer and thicker the wings themselves, the greater the absorbent surface —and the faster I grew. Symmetry was soon lost when four several-ton fragments of a comet fell into the upper left quadrant of the net, and this time the net held. The sudden increase of the extensa in that direction caused a proportional shift of the perceptor index, and from then on the vertical axis of symmetry of my body was never to run along the spine. Shanna, who woke up earlier, saw me sleeping always on my left side, with my legs contracted and my head thrown back epileptically. At first, she would jerk me and wake me up at such a sight, suspecting some kind of attack —but in time she got used to it. She was also the first (even before me) to notice that I only turned to the left and only looked over my left shoulder, even if it was less convenient and required more effort. I tried to consciously oppose the reflexes, but then I always had the feeling as if I was forcibly twisting my body into arthritic knots, almost breaking bones and tearing tendons. I also noticed that I was doing more and more things with my left hand; I was also increasingly grabbing a pen with it, and only after a few scribbles did I realize that this hand did not remember the shapes of letters. I also sometimes lost my balance while riding, somehow subconsciously I would slide to the left side of the saddle, and the horse would read this in its own way

and veer off course.

I spent a lot of time in the garden. Bartholomew, living alone in the manor, had no problem with feeding himself, especially since his family (Shanna and other helpful relatives) fed him regularly —although a bit like you would feed your favorite wild animal from the nearby forest. Now, with five people living here, this arrangement could no longer work. We had significantly enlarged the garden and orchard. In the second season, I began selling the surplus vegetables at the Market; I always made sure to enter into transactions in which the Council participated, thus reaping additional, "hidden" profit from barter exchanges. Was this fraud? Theft, perhaps? But who was I robbing, when on the other side of the scale was infinite wealth, a bottomless Cornucopia?

I attributed such a rapid harvest not so much to my agricultural skills as to Master Bartholomew's private Covenant, which of course included guarantees of local weather, and probably also the chemical composition of the soil. Nevertheless, it is hard not to feel proud when a thing into which so much work has been put succeeds so wonderfully. The garden was most beautiful after a summer rain, in the pastel light of evening; and also on spring mornings. The gears in the epicyclical machine of my life creaked, now it turned like this: night on the terrace —sleep until noon —garden until dusk —supper —sky; and always Medusa. I slowly swept Susa into these revolutions, year after year her machine learned my wheels and eccentricities. When she was seven, eight, Susanna was already waiting for me on the patio at the stroke of noon and together we would go down to work in the garden. I brought her denim shorts from the Market and a large straw hat, which she tied under her chin with a blue ribbon so that the wind wouldn't blow it away.

Help, she didn't help much —but her mouth would never close. "So why do we need so many tomatoes?"

"I'll sell them at the Market."

"To whom?"

"Not everyone can do everything. You know my family breeds horses." (I recently took her to the farm.) "Another —cattle. Another one grows grain and grinds grain for flour. Oh, right, Mom will have to go get flour, remind me, we're running out of supplies."

“Well, but how do they know how much flour to give for one tomato?”

“We agree. Of course, they’d like more tomatoes, I’d like more flour. After all, we always come to an agreement. Otherwise, they’d leave without any tomatoes —and what good are those mountains of flour to them? How many tomatoes can you eat?”

She giggled.

“A lot.”

“But not all of them. Isn’t it true that when you eat too much of the same thing, everything suddenly starts to taste awful and you’d give up a basket of tomatoes for a slice of bread? Hmm?”

“Well... But if it’s like that with everyone, then all you had to do was wait a bit... I mean, if you had made a bigger supply first... and you could get as much of anything as you wanted for almost nothing. Then you could trade it with others, since you can’t eat it yourself. And-and. . . “ she was excited about the idea “you wouldn’t have to grow anything or cultivate anything or anything, because there would always be more of it than you could eat! You’d just travel and trade! What about that, Dad? What about that?”

“You’ve just become a merchant, congratulations.” I took off my dirty glove and, without rising from my knees, offered her my hand. She shook it, smiling broadly. Despite the gaps from her baby teeth and the streaks of dirt on her face, I could already see her mother clearly in that smile: ”a smile above an earth snake,” like a seal, like a secret distinguishing mark. Susanna’s hair was different (almost pure blond), her eyes were different (gray) —but that didn’t matter. It was enough that she smiled.

“A merchant! So why aren’t you a merchant?”

“We don’t do everything we could. This is complicated. Really...”

“Dad!”

“Okay.”

She sat on her heels on the other side of the flower bed, pushed her hat down her back. I took off my other glove, wiped my hands on my trousers.

I wondered how to explain it to her. The conjunction of the Sixth and Fifth Planets of Medusa —gas giants on the verge of nuclear ignition, with an albedo oscillating around one hundred percent —slightly twisted the gravity gradients, unwinding my lower arm by three, four kilometers, which had been causing my back to hurt for a week, and I kept straightening up and stretching with a groan. I stretched now, gaining time as well.

"Okay, let's try this. Can you be sad and happy at the same time?"

"Nooo... no."

"But when you stop being sad, you rejoice; and vice versa. But can you be old and young at the same time?"

"Of course not."

"You can't suddenly decide that you're going to stop being old and therefore be young; these are irreversible things. But you don't control age, it's not your decision, you don't choose that state; it's just that: you get old. Now imagine that there is one that you can consciously decide on. Not old age, not youth, something else. Some kind of... nirvana. Do you remember what nirvana is? I explained it to you."

She nodded.

"So you choose this nirvana. It is an irreversible state that excludes a certain number of other states. No big deal. For example: that you will never have a toothache again."

"Oh! Really?"

"You would like that, wouldn't you?" I licked my fingers and wiped the streaks of dirt from her face. "Everyone would. So you are in this nirvana without aching teeth and you see that you could never feel any pain again. Sooner or later you decide to enter super-nirvana. It in turn excludes a much larger number of states: hunger, thirst, fatigue, as well as satiety and other pleasures of the body. But as you live in this super-nirvana, you don't lack them at all, and it seems completely logical and natural to choose super-nirvana and, consequently, super-nirvana, and so on, until you reach that ultimate nirvana in which you are immortal, indestructible, almost omnipotent and omniscient, but which excludes so many other states that you can no longer rejoice or be

sad, be old or young. You don't enjoy a sunny morning or rain on a hot day, you don't feel the wind on your skin or the ground under your feet... I mean, you can pretend all of this, but you always remember this is a pretense, and pretended pain is not the same as real pain, and pretended joy is not the same as real joy. Do you understand, Susa?"

"I don't know..." She bit her lower lip. "Is it true about this nirvana? Could I choose like that? So that my teeth... you know. Could I?"

"Yes."

She frowned in great contemplation.

"This buying of food... Why not, really?"

"Because these states, which I have called nirvanas, concern not only individuals, but also entire groups. In a society organized in a given way, the choice of nirvana would seem natural to you, even necessary, and vice versa: for people in a super-nirvana, certain ways of organizing social life are more convenient, and others are downright impossible. Once you cross a certain threshold, whether on the path of individual or social change, further transformations cannot be stopped, they are only a matter of time. Now, commerce is beyond this threshold —just like cars, airplanes, trains, skyscrapers... You've seen them all in books, you liked them, right? We could have them if we only wanted them. But then we would want something more, and more, and more... until we no longer desired anything that we value now. Do you understand what I mean?"

She shook her head negatively.

"Oh well," I sighed, "we'll come back to this sometime."

"Do we have to grow tomatoes so we can have toothaches? Ugh, Dad...!"

"No sense, huh? Maybe you're right..."

It doesn't matter that she didn't understand, didn't believe, I knew she wouldn't. In some form, however, she'll remember my words and the idea will take root in her, questions and doubts will arise that wouldn't have arisen otherwise; so once again I've closed off a billion possible paths of life to her, opened a billion others.

I pulled on my gloves, she handed me the knife. The sun was setting over the garden, Shanna was waving and calling to us from the patio, Susanna shouted something back. Yes, I was bending her machine to my rhythm, accelerating its wheels to my speed... The extensa was already grinding and devouring comets and small planetoids into dust, and I was beginning to attract the finer dust with my very mass. Another straightening of the back and stretching of the arms —for thirty thousand kilometers. I remember that a storm broke out that evening and I was reading about Cinderella to the children. The sky was overcast, for several days I could not predict the Moon, and how could I predict the absence, and even less the Absent? —so I did not expect it.

I took Shanna and the children to my father's funeral. We went as soon as the news came, so a day too early; we had to sleep in one of the guest rooms of the old cottage. Once again the house was full of relatives, neighbors, acquaintances, toddlers chasing each other in the hallways, balconies, and around the buildings, adults exchanging old and new gossip, dogs barking, babies crying, mother and aunts bustling about in the kitchen... A wake or a wedding, it didn't matter.

The coffin was placed in a side room on the ground floor, between bowls of incense. Father looked little like himself, his face had spread to the sides, as if swollen, watery, and the bandage clenching his jaw gave him a look of malicious determination. How old was he, fifty? Something like that; I wasn't even sure. They had shaved him, but the stubble was starting to grow on his skin again. I stood and watched, and a hot weight, some organic tuber, moved in my chest, upward and toward my sternum, so that I was involuntarily leaning over the coffin and breathing through my open mouth, and the inch-thick, miles-long fibers of the central extensa twisted to the rhythm of my breathing, and the peripheral extensa trembled and rippled—from those shivers that ran over my skin when I remembered how he had walked, straight, from the bright veranda into the dark gale, a lamp in his high-raised hand, a sure step, the darkness receding before him and the demons of the night fleeing... and now he lay and rotted, gray skinned, with dirty posthumous stubble, a doll of fat and folded tissue.

I went out into the back yard. In the corral, Larisa was trotting a foal on a long lunge. I went to the fence, leaned against the rail. Larisa glanced quickly over her shoulder. I took out some cigarettes. She shook her head. I lit one.

"How did it happen?"

"In the rain. Lungs. Three days. Quickly; the Doctor didn't make it, he was visiting somewhere. High fever and all. He was struggling a bit. In the end —in his sleep."

"Did he have time?"

"He did; but no. Besides, no one expected it."

"How's mother?"

"In a work frenzy. It'll be worse after the funeral, when people leave... Will you stay?"

"How long?"

She shrugged.

"I have Council in a week" I mumbled.

"Will you take his place?"

"I guess so."

"You had children."

"No."

Nathaniel's wife showed up, looking for her grandchildren, and whatever else Larisa wanted to tell me, she didn't say.

The foal (Polypore, daughter of Flame) fell in love with Susanna, and the love was mutual; the little one eventually begged him from her aunt. Peter, in turn, returned from his grandfather's funeral with two puppies from the last litter of one of Daniel's bitches. I doubt that Peter remembered anything about the funeral itself; he probably doesn't remember his grandfather at all. We buried him behind the stream, under the willows. Toward the end, after the Pastor's speech, it started to rain, most of them didn't stick around to see the grave filled in and the cross planted. As I was leaving, I looked around for the children. Susanna and Peter had hidden from the rain under a large oak tree. I jumped over the stream. Peter was sleepy; Susanna was looking up and peering

out into the branches. "What's up?" "Nothing." "Did you see anything?" "No, nothing." "Come on, we won't stand under a tree during the storm."

That night I couldn't sleep. I entered a thick cloud of hydrogen, the extensa opened like a hungry coelom, streams of hot energy circulated within me at the speed of light, my veins and arteries itched, my nerves burned, my spine scratched against the muscles. First, I stood by the window open to the night rain (there was no light in the room) and smoked herbal cigarettes. The children slept wrapped in blankets, their faces turned toward each other, cheeks slightly flushed, mouths half open. Shanna snored quietly on the couch, her head fell limply against the backrest. The energy in me was so great that I simply had to move, to do something sudden and irreversible, the hand with the cigarette trembled before my eyes —I left as quickly as possible, just to avoid looking at them, just to push away the temptation, because my fists were already clenching by themselves.

I found Elder Leon on the veranda. He wasn't sleeping. When he saw me, he stretched out in a chair to an almost horizontal position. "Do you have any idea how this damp makes my rheumatism swell?" he mumbled, pointing to the non-existent extension of his stump. I escaped to the balcony of the first floor. The boards creaked under my feet. I walked around the building, looking into the dark rooms. However, one was bright. I stopped. Light was bursting from the window of the annex, I could clearly see the projection of the wall from which I had once spied Death with Larisa in the yellow glow of the naked bulb. Who lived there now? I couldn't remember. I threw away the cigarette, put my legs over the railing. Medusa was burning my back, the cosmos was on my side. I jumped. My feet slipped off the wet bricks, I waved my arms, everything was slippery under my fingers, no support, no handhold, I was flying down; At the last moment I touched an old hook with my hand, but it gave way too, only tearing my hand open. I hit the ground. Great waves of pain passed through the extensa, for a moment even the stars were darkened. I fell on my left side and that was luck. I could move. I sat down in a puddle of cold mud. Something creaked in my hip joint. I waited a dozen breaths. I stood up. The waves were calming down; now their second and third reflections were returning to me. I hobbled around, to the kitchen: I had to wash this hand, the iron must have gone right to the bone.

The kitchen was dark, I turned on the light. I went to the sink and only then did I notice my mother, asleep sitting up at the side table. I turned on the

tap, the cold water washed the dirt and blood from the wound.

“What happened to you?“

I looked back (over my left shoulder, so I almost did a pirouette on my heel). She wasn’t sleeping, she was fully conscious; she was just blinking, slightly blinded by the sudden brightness.

“I rolled over. I can’t sleep. Iodine —where is it...”

“Top left, above the knives.”

“Who is occupying Grandpa Michael’s room now?”

“Hmm? Nobody.”

Mother didn’t move a muscle as she bandaged my thumb and wrist, looking at me, worried —she was sitting hunched over, it was hard to even see the rhythm of her breathing.

“Everything okay?”

She raised her eyes and stared at me for long minutes.

“You know you’ve stopped aging?” she finally noticed when I had already tied the bandage.

“It’s just a slowing down of the process.”

“Really? You look exactly the same to me.”

“An Illusion. In such small time frames...”.

“He would be alive, right?”

“Mom...”

“The Pastor said it wasn’t from Them, that you didn’t betray Bartholomew with this...” she blurted out in one breath and fell silent. “That you are in accordance with tradition” she added. “Now I think that if... You understand. If...”

She lowered her head and in order to look into her face, I had to go up and

kneel by the chair.

"But you know that he would never... not father."

She tangled her fingers in my hair.

"What does it all matter?" she whispered. "If only he were alive; any kind. Do you think I would hesitate for even a second? Do you think it would make any difference to me? That there is a limit after which you say to yourself: "No, thank you, I'd rather he wasn't alive?" She clenched her fingers and pulled my head until I placed it on her lap. She was leaning over me now, kneeling uncomfortably, aching, whispering in my ear: "There is no such line. There is no such line. There is no such line. There is no such line. There is no such line."

I took over the position on the Council vacated by my father almost unnoticed, the change in my status meant only a change in mental etiquette, there were no external manifestations, no one commented on it even a word. Such inheritance through the bloodline does not result from ideological dogmas —it is a manifestation of pragmatism. Similarly, the Pastor was always the son (or nephew) of the Pastor, the Doctor —of the Doctor. After all, there are no schools for them —and these are even more than professions. Inheritance in a family is not just knowledge, but also a lifestyle; there is a certain basic continuity, a certain package of necessary mental traits, the possession of which is most likely in a member of the same mini-community, i.e. family. This is how we live in the Green Country.

Master Bartholomew himself was one of such institutions; his longevity and childlessness conditioned a different tradition, however. What did I inherit from him? He did not give any direct commandments. Advice, if given on his own initiative, remained unclear at the least. "Don't forget one thing" he said one day, noticing how for no apparent reason I suddenly jumped to my feet and waved my left arm, making wild grimaces toward the sky. "The dependence is mutual." Of course the dependence is mutual, how could he think I was not aware of it? After all, the whole thing is about the free flow of information —because where did my sudden left-handedness and other aberrations come from? So what did he really mean? What did he emphasize so strongly? But the Observer would not allow me to approach him and question him like a

child, to draw out direct answers; one must accept the Master's words with silent understanding. I would inherit only knowledge in the first case, whereas in this case —this is how one inherits a lifestyle.

The time of disintegration inexorably came. Susanna went on longer and longer escapades on Poryphore, spending longer and longer time with Daniel and Larisa, among the horses; since she was fifteen, she had spent almost as much time there as she had in the manor; a new great epicycle had built itself into her machine. I, on the other hand, had been slowly falling apart for months: arm, wing, leg, nose, moon. It had begun according to the recipe, with the precipitation of the separate transmutation organs that had drifted from the main spider of the extensa on scanty streams of gases and eaten into the head of a mighty carbon-ice comet, in time taking over the surrounding cloud of debris, until after three months there was no comet, only a twenty-kilometer-long rotating rosette of photoreceptors thin as a cell membrane, preserving its momentum vector: the Eye. The extensa moved in the Medusa system on a hyperbolic curve, descending slowly between the orbits of the Seventh and the Sixth toward the star and the Anomaly. The next Eyes, and the radio-sensitive Ears, fell away from me on tangent paths, gradually moving further and further away, slower and faster, with and without their own acceleration, until I had thus encompassed a quarter, a half, two-thirds of the circumference of the Medusa system's ecliptic plane. Having thus dispersed over forty billion kilometers, I lost my sense of body continuity, that instinctive facility of orienting the extensa according to the parallel perceptuum of the human organism. The extensa's nervous system continued to filter and index the reproducible stimuli, trying to maintain a constant pattern of mapping, but this was increasingly difficult as more and more of the extensa's mass was contained in the mobile, split-off peripheries, and more and more reprosion particles leaked into them from the original Seed, already almost completely consumed by the asymmetrical body of the vacuum spider, which in turn was consumed by the Eyes, Ears, probes and transmutators of various purposes and metabolisms. The first dozen of them had already landed on the largest moon of the Sixth. I was slowly devouring the planetary system of Medusa. Tidal forces, real and imaginary (because they were born from the secondary composition of reprosion impulses), caused sudden rushes of blood to the head, terrifying, hours-long heart arrhythmias, nocturnal vomiting and nosebleeds. I broke vessels and cut myself, gripped by sharp neuralgias —Shanna forbade me from approaching the kitchen, and Peter often replaced me in the garden; but he probably did this only out of duty, unlike

his sister. He too was moving away, drifting somewhere beyond my horizon.

The machine returned to its old gears, now the revolutions of its wheels were once again fitting into Shanna's cycles; a new synchronization took place, in time and space. We would go to the steppe, on various pretexts, often for two, three days, spending the night under the bright starry firmament. In the light of the campfire, in the light of the sun partially hidden under the horizon, and above the earth spread in a heavy half-ellipse —her skin took on an even darker shade, the finer wrinkles disappeared under the greasy shadow. Wrinkles, a sign of age —which I had not noticed in myself, clearly younger than her in appearance; meanwhile, they tore at the corners of her mouth, surrounded her eyes, crossed out her forehead. Only in her sleep did they really disappear to some extent. She had recently cut her hair, very short, perhaps because of the first lines of gray, which I came across when I immersed my hand in the fiery curls —now there was nothing to wrap my fingers in, the fire was fading. The skin no longer had that smell or texture or taste, dry and soft under my lips, even the salt of the sweat on my tongue was different as I kissed my way down her body, between the tails of her unbuttoned shirt, between her breasts exposed to the cold dawn air —also different, heavier, misshapen; only her nipples were fraying and darkening just as much, from the cold, or maybe not from the cold. Her hands woke up, she groped for me blindly, without lifting herself from the blanket; she pressed me to her with her right, her left found my hand and intertwined her fingers with hers. I reached for the hollow of her navel with the tip of my tongue, she started laughing, each of her breaths made my head toss and I couldn't stop laughing myself. My right arm was free, I reached up, breastbone, collarbone, neck, chin, I covered her mouth. She parted her lips, caught my thumb with her teeth. Only then did she stop laughing; but a silent giggle still shook her body. She also loosened her grip on my hair, pushing me down until I unbuckled her belt, pulled her pants off her, in which she tried to help me with jerks of her hips, until we dragged each other out of the blanket, onto the grass encrusted with crystalline dew, from whose cold touch we both shivered briefly, but by then she had already locked me between her thighs, curled on her side into a fetal position, biting my thumb harder and harder, clinging to my hair more and more tightly, with her eyelids squeezed shut and her feet trembling in a nervous tic —which I knew well, of course, knowing Shanna like my own extensa, but which I did not see, biting into her with all my senses, in the sharp smell of her arousal, in the salty taste, in the quick and accelerating rhythm of hoarse inhalations and exhalations, which I felt more through the trembling of her thighs than I

heard, and those muscle spasms, the lack of breath, the teeth on my hand, all these were signs of my power over her, control through pleasure, and in this way I was pleased by her pleasure, the awareness that the touch of lips, the brush of tongue, was throwing her to the other end of the scale of senses —until she tore herself away from me for good, pushed me away, released me from the grip of my legs, and I sat up, also breathing heavily, with a wet face, smiling stupidly; looking into the sun, I squinted and sucked my bleeding thumb. "Oh my, I bit you, didn't I? Come on." I leaned over, she embraced me, pulled me, the blush was already receding from her breast, but her cheeks were still pink and her breath was quick and hot as I immersed myself in it and mixed mine with it. "Mmmmmmmm" from deep in the throat, an endless, feline growl of hunger, as my right hand tugged at the buckle of my belt, because my left hand once again intertwined with mine, which by the way destroyed my balance and we rolled to the side, into fresh grass and dew, but I was already too hot to pay attention, hot energies rushed through dozens of kilometers of black membrane, small and large flowers of the peripheral extensa contracted and relaxed spasmodically, short waves of causeless tremors passed over the starry skeletons of Eyes and Ears, transmutation intestines accelerated the digestion of cold rocks, something popped in the confluence of mile-long nerves, I had to embrace her more tightly, penetrate deeper, until, oh, there was a moment of perfect stillness, peace and quiet and relaxation of muscles —so we froze, just catching our breath and looking each other in the eye from a distance of ten centimeters, I —sitting flat, half-reclined, with her sweater tangled across her chest, she leaned into me, looking down, with one leg wrapped behind my back, the other bent straight at her side, with her foot in the wet grass, the movements of our eyeballs were so slight that they were almost imperceptible, we scanned each other's faces, always returning to the black pupils, inexorably, from one small grimace to the next, thus building twin smiles, wide, indecent, with parted lips, bared teeth, and so on from a giggle to a loud laugh, and when she laughed, the wrinkles marked her even more, and she was even more Shanna, and it was no longer even about beauty, youth, purity —only that kind of closeness that we yearn for all our lives, from childhood; close and still closer, until even the red forests of my lungs, growing on the ammoniacal seas of the moon of the Sixth, felt its warmth, even the billion-ton spider of the vacuum expanded and opened to the glow of Medusa, five, ten, fifteen seconds, a flash of prominence shot through the Anomaly —and a muscle in the shoulder twitched, I ran my hand over Shanna's dewy back, she leaned deeper, swallowed my breath, hips rippled, and I moved, through laughter, through the purple dawn on the Sixth, the bright dawn over

the Green Land, through the memory of old and new instincts, toward the huge, hot star. Closing my eyes, I Saw and Heard with all the greater precision. After a while she had to get up and put on her trousers, put on her shoes —she stepped over me, and when I lifted my eyelids and caught her calf, she tore herself away, jumped back and waved her finger. “No-no-no, what do you think you’re doing, Sir?” ”Shanna...” ”Besides, we were supposed to stop by the Jakons, weren’t we? Race you to the Jakons!” She laughed girlishly, grabbed the reins of the already saddled Piorun, Piorun jerked for some reason when she threw her leg over him, she fell onto her back, Piorun jerked a second time, her hand lost its grip on the saddle, her boot slipped from the stirrup, she landed on the ground with a dull groan. “Oh, you see” I laughed “divine punishment! You should have... Shanna?” I sat up, turning over my left shoulder. The extensa already knew, it was curling inwards, withering in an instant. I crawled up as quickly as I could, not even getting up from my knees. The stone wasn’t much bigger than my fist. Shanna blinked, staring into space, gasping for air, her mouth open fishy, saliva dripping down the lines of her wrinkles. ”Speak to me! Tell me!” I grabbed her by the shoulders, looked into her terrified eyes. ”Talk to me! Don’t worry about anything! Say something! Put your lips together! That’s enough!” But just one more blink, and that was the end of all movement.

V

What selfishness is hidden in mourning! What selfishness —to grieve over someone's death! We have lost someone who was a source of pleasure, benefit to us, whose presence aroused positive feelings in us —and now we grieve. That we will no longer be able to experience such and such joys with them; that they will no longer put us in such and such a mood; that it will be harder. So much sadness and tears —because they are dead. What hypocrisy!

Perhaps if we believed that after death they suffer some unspeakable torments —it would be unselfish grief. But only the greatest sinners can be grieved in this way.

However, there is also another kind of grief, unselfish, although also focused on oneself: grief that during the deceased's life we acted as we did; that their life could have been better, happier, different —if it were not for us. Now there is no way to change or fix anything —the switch has closed, everything has been squandered, every chance have been lost.

All you can hear is the ticking of the metronome of silence, counting down the bars to our death, each one a little shorter: one-two, one-two, one-two, one.

I didn't understand what was happening to me. I was losing hours, almost days. For example, I don't remember almost any sunlight —well, maybe a little evening twilight; but apart from that —night. Did I sleep through the light so regularly? I don't remember people either. The manor was empty —where had Bartholomew gone, where were the children? There were certainly some

guests. But I don't remember them either. The house was quiet and dark. I didn't go out into the garden either. Did anyone look after it at all? Not me.

I should remember everything, but I don't remember these things; I can't remember her funeral, for example. I know that she was buried behind the orchard, because I later came across a cross with her name there —but who buried her and when...? Memories are non-linear, nothing connects one image with another. I looked at myself in the mirror once and it turned out that I had a thick beard, long hair, and that my only clothing was one of Bartholomew's dressing gowns, and when I opened it —my ribs poked through the dirty skin. I had managed to lose so much weight, so a long time must have passed, right? Because, indeed, I don't remember what I ate; if I ate at all.

I was losing weight, shrinking, sinking, Eyes and Ears were dying, not growing back, as they were torn by space debris, not correcting their orbits, as they were pulled into gravitational traps. Two radio telescope networks must have been destroyed in this way, falling on one of the planets or one of their moons, because after a certain night I no longer felt them, I no longer heard them; I should remember the pain of mutilation —I don't remember.

On the other hand, memories of the living room on the ground floor are frequent: as I sit in an armchair, my back to the windows, the night fills the room, covers all objects, extinguishes the silver reflections, smoothes the edges of shadow, and presses me into that armchair with a soft fist, until I not only cannot, but do not want to, do not feel like, have no need to move, and I sit like this —it is hard to say motionless, since I do not at all try to maintain the position —I sit dead, eyes open but not looking at anything in particular, body, both bodies —distant; all signals from them are muffled, I know more about my legs than I feel them, I am more aware of the red forest on the moon of the Sixth than I am it; time passes me by in a rushing stream, I am empty, I am calm, I do not think about anything, a sticky warmth spreads over me, extinguishing all internal tremors, perhaps my mouth is open and some sound escapes from it, but I do not hear, I do not feel; I sit. I remember that. Also small fragments of scenes completely lost: the coldness of the parquet and the roughness of the carpet under my back (it was obvious that I had slept on the floor on the ground floor); a glass puzzle on the hall floor (the wind had broken the window, I started to collect the shards, but at some point another association must have prevailed, because I ended up composing a large stained glass window out of them); the stinking corpse of Piorun in the yard in front of the manor; scars on

the hand from some old wounds; someone's scream, echoing inside the building; the Anomaly obscuring the continents of Drugia; a white ball of bedding falling over the banister of the stairs; splinters digging into my knees as I knelt on the top step of the stairs, howling as I dragged some weight; a lamp in my hand, lit, the sharp smell of kerosene and the wavering flame sooting the glass; ants migrating up the wooden leg of the table. There was some happiness in it, some self-satisfaction; and certainly peace. In this stillness, in this inertia, in this amnesia. Sometimes, it is true, an undesirable association appeared, then an electric shock would shake me, like a sudden toothache, the irritation of a naked nerve —but immediately I would sink deeper into great peace, I would pull it over me like a soft, warm blanket; and I felt good again.

I almost never left the manor. In my memories, there is not even a world outside the windows —the windows remained uncovered, but I do not remember the views beyond them at all, so I cannot attune individual sequences to the seasons. Besides, there was only darkness in different shades.

The nearest fragment of memory oriented on the time axis pulsates with hot light. Larysa walked through the manor and turned on all the lamps, opened the windows wide. Behind them the darkness was thickening, but here, inside, the omnipresent brightness stung the eyes. I raised my hand to protect myself with my forearm, sank deeper into the armchair.

She stood over me, grabbed my wrists.

"Now!"

"Let go!"

"Get over yourself. Come on!"

I stopped struggling. She was leaning over the armchair, her face devoid of all expression. Deeply tanned, she seemed much thinner, her cheekbones more prominent, her lips narrower; I also noticed now that her hair was braided, tied at the nape of her neck.

"What are you on about?"

"There should be a razor somewhere here, or at least a knife sharp enough. Besides, we have guns and rope. So which do you prefer?"

"What?"

"To kill yourself. How? So I can clean up the body while I'm here."

"You're crazy. Piss off."

I tried again to free myself from her grip —but she was stronger. It even surprised me for a moment.

"No?" she snapped. "Choose!"

"Larisa, what the hell are you..."

"Now!"

"I'm not committing suicide, leave me alone!"

She let go of me. I blinked in the bright light, unsuccessfully trying to straighten up in the armchair with its sunken seat and concave backrest. Larisa looked at me coldly for a few seconds, then turned on her heel and left. I breathed a sigh of relief. We should turn off all those lights, what was she thinking, the photovoltaic cells on the roof charge one poor battery for half a day, after all it's...

I turned around at the sound of quick footsteps. She entered with a rifle in her hands, reloading as she walked.

"What are you..."

She shot off the headrest of the armchair, chips stung my face, the bang deafened, I fell to the floor. From all fours I saw her reloading the gun again. I jumped up and ran out, staggering to the left and dragging my dressing gown across the dusty surfaces. She was following me. I rushed into the hall and through the open door —in front of the manor, into the night. The rhythmic clatter of her high riding boots' heels chased me. I fled into the darkness. I collapsed in the grass only beyond the edge of semi-darkness (the night was cloudy), breathing heavily and trying to gather my thoughts; my ears were still ringing. Larisa stood in the doorway, her rifle resting in the crook of her elbow.

"I'll wait!" she shouted. "I'm taking over this house! Come in when you decide!"

She stared into the night for a moment longer, then stepped back and loudly bolted the door.

I went around the building, checked the entrance from the patio. The center of mass of the extensa had meanwhile descended along a passive path into an orbit even tighter than the orbit of the Fifth, and the spider, together with its surviving periphery, although partially dead and torn along its many-kilometer-long tendons, was exposed to such showers of energy from Medusa that I only had to pay attention there for a few moments for my skin to start itching, adrenaline to rush into my blood, my breathing to quicken, and purple moths to fly before my eyes. I opened the door with a trembling hand. Larisa was bustling around somewhere in the front part of the house, I could hear her, the hard clatter of her steps as she walked across the bare parquet. I was barefoot, that was my advantage. I approached her silently; when she was carrying a tray full of dishes through the hall, I jumped from behind the stairs. She managed to turn sideways and throw the tray at me, I got hit in the forehead with some cutlery. I grabbed her by the forearms, we hit the wall. She kicked, cursing. I lost my balance, pulled her with me, we fell into a corner, banging our heads together. She tried to pull away, but I caught her wrists, I was strong now, gigajoules boiling in my muscles, billions and billions of tons pinning her to the floor. She kicked and cursed, helpless.

"Now!"

"Let go!"

"Get off yourself!"

We were both panting; with the next breath she choked and broke into a rattling cough —but what had started as a cough ended as a laugh, and a minute later we were giggling like five-year-olds.

"BUT did you have to shoot my chair?"

"You probably haven't seen yourself. Take a look. Look around. It's become a pigsty here. You stink quite badly."

"I thought maybe Bartholomew..."

“Bartholomew? He’s been keeping his distance for a long time. I met him a month ago at the Waterfalls; he wanders around the Country, visiting places of memory. I warned him about the outlaws —you know, they’ve appeared again: there’s been no trace of Kolai, the Wielpol brothers, a few other people. These gangs have been growing stronger lately, they’re not just outcasts from us and the northern settlements, but also some of the young ones from the farms swallowed by the sea. Bartholomew doesn’t want to come back, he says he couldn’t look at you anymore. When was the last time he came here?”

“Hmm, because I know... Well, he was there recently, we talked... No?”

“No. Susanna is the one who comes here most often, but you spat on her and swore at her recently, so...”

“What did I do??”

“Christ, you really don’t remember. Do you at least realize how much time has passed? It’ll be three years since Shanna died; you really should get a grip. I’ve never heard of anyone breaking down like that. I understand that you loved her, but... What?”

“Nothing.”

We were sitting in the kitchen, drinking cold coffee. We had to eat bread with jam, because there was nothing else to eat: the refrigerator was leaking, worms were boiling in the flour, and there was whey left from the milk. The bread was moldy, but she had cut it herself: black, hard. She had come straight from the pastures.

Two cockroaches were walking majestically on the windowsill.

“What’s at home?”

“Are you really interested? Listen, maybe you’ll come with me there? Alone in this tomb” she waved her hand, encompassing the kitchen and the dark corridor “I would have gone weird too.”

“Bartholomew somehow didn’t go weird... Okay, don’t laugh. Maybe I’ll actually go... What about Peter? I understand that Susanna...”

“Peter went north. To those radicals from the caves and manure. Some time

ago. Didn't you know?"

The question was rhetorical: I froze with the cup halfway to my lips.

"But —why? Peter?"

He was my son, but somehow I didn't fully feel like his father. As long as he was a child, as long as I didn't see in his clear gaze that silent, stubborn inquisitiveness, and in his words —irony, questioning *a priori* everything I said, sweat remained an easy and satisfying object of feelings. Later it gradually became more and more difficult, too close and too frequent contacts built up stupid claims between us, chains of mutual malice, and above all —forced insincerity. So I tried to keep my distance. But this also turned against me, when with time he transformed, completely beyond my control, due to the lack of any synchronicity with the epicyclical machine of my life, into a stranger. There was never an open quarrel, I never uttered aloud a bad word —nevertheless he knew, and I knew he knew. We no longer spoke to each other: our Observers spoke through us.

Larisa shook her head, looked away, stared out the window, as if she could really see something in the monolithic darkness.

"Suffering is egotistical by its nature; do you think that no one else was concerned about her death? He put up with you the longest. You know, he looked after the garden and the orchard. After that he hardly said anything at all when he came to visit us. But... Christ, he knew all about the filth that was eating you from the inside! Are you surprised that he drew such conclusions? You were falling apart before his eyes. I saw myself how you lost control over your body. That's not the tradition of the Country, no matter what Bartholomew says. You should throw it all away... Or give in to Them. So —what happened to you? Peter is young, he went to extremes. Maybe he'll change his mind..."

I gently put the cup down.

"No filth is eating me."

"Aha."

"Larisa, for God's sake, don't play the superstitious ignoramus at least! There are no dark secrets in this. The space exploration project is at a minimal

cost, this mass sowing of Seeds on reprographic technology —after all, this began over a century before the beginning of Involution. But They encysted, escaped into optimized systems, they have infinity inside, not outside, and they are not interested in the stars at all. The material world offers a very limited number of phenomena after all, the laws are constant, physics is unchanging, surprises are small, and there is great repeatability; They, on the other hand, have absolute freedom inside, any physics, any universe is possible there, as long as it is logically consistent. The archive of reprographic endings was first inherited by various agencies, then universities, and finally it came down to individual people in the Country, and finally —Bartholomew. There weren't many openings, despite such a long time, because you have to count the distances and the fraction of the speed of light at which the Seeds were pushed out of the Solar System. God forbid, I'm not sure if there was anyone before Bartholomew; the organs don't look particularly thinned out. Restrictions against the widespread development of technology are one thing —and a single application of technologies that are completely beyond our reach anyway is another. You can't demonize everything that just..."

"A single application, you say." She chewed the hard bread thoughtfully. "I don't know anything about it, you've read so many of his books that you're practically living halfway in the times before Involution —but tell me, what's the point of fidelity on your deathbed? What's supposed to stop us from a 'single application' then?"

I shrugged my left shoulder.

"Nothing."

She began to look at me with disturbing attention. I smiled —cynically, as it seemed to me. She pushed the plate away, leaned over the table, reaching for my hands. Her hands were warmer.

"You know very well that it wouldn't be her. Not a human."

"Oh, come on, I won't start crying here."

"Are you ashamed of your little sister?"

I sneezed and that broke the mood. I freed my hands from her grip, blew my nose on the lapel of my dressing gown. Larisa grimaced at that terribly.

"A degenerate. You could actually join your son."

"You see, Larisa" I began, taking a deep breath and folding my hands behind my neck "it's not about how others perceive such a decision of a dying person, but about what would stop him —when he feels that this is his penultimate breath. Cultural, civilizational arguments, they don't apply to him anymore. But because such conversions set a bad example for the living, because they corrupt the culture and destroy the status quo —culture exerts pressure, trains us, builds the axioms of tradition into our subconscious, so strongly that even at the moment of death we do not hesitate. Each subsequent convert violates this tradition and contaminates the culture; if the frequency of betrayals increases beyond a critical level, the system loses stability and it will continue like an avalanche. This is how the other enclaves disappeared, and this is how the Green Country will eventually perish, and then there will be no one left to cultivate the biological traditions of *Homo sapiens*. Did you listen to what Daniel is saying? The state is a homeostatic machine —but cultures behave similarly, except that they do not have that rigid organizational skeleton and their methods of government are more, hmm, subtle."

She killed both cockroaches with the handle of a bread knife: chop, chop. The knife still had blue streaks of jam on its blade.

"But you wouldn't think that way if it weren't for Bartholomew and that reprosion plague in your body, would you? If it weren't for Shanna's death."

When dawn broke, I went out into the garden. It was starting to rain, a dark dampness hung in the air, its cold stinging my freshly shaved face unpleasantly. Larisa found me trousers and a sweater that weren't eaten by moths; dressing gowns, she swore they'd slept in, and to hell with Bartholomew. The garden looked like it had been flooded, covered in a uniform layer of mud mixed with plant rot, the boundaries of individual crops were impossible to distinguish. When exactly had Peter left? A shovel and a rake stood by the patio wall, already rusty. I looked at the orchard. One of the trees, clearly broken by the storm, lay across the path, another leaned dangerously. A lot of work, days and weeks, even months. What time of year was it? Autumn, I think. I stretched, trying deliberately to overcome my reflexive hunching. Something cracked in my back, my left arm ached. I took a deep breath. The extensa opened to Medusa's fire, transmutation organs came back to life, matter captured in black membranes, and a lot of it had managed to accumulate during this time, would

be absorbed, digested, built into the damaged structures, new ones would emerge from the scattered peripheries, even more powerful Eyes and Ears would grow from spores shot into planetoids, the root system of the lunar forest, already reaching hundreds of meters below the surface of the permafrost, would be constituted into a specialized processor, a semi-organic brain prosthesis, my third frontal lobe, two thousand kilometers in diameter... But despite all the movement, despite all the energy, and the cold wind on my smooth cheeks, and the red glow of the star on my skin, and Larisa's voice from inside the manor, despite this, that wolf inside me continued to howl, a prolonged howl ran through the insides of my body, to escape from my lips in a short moan, until trembling took over my limbs and I had to lean against the balustrade, take a deeper breath, but still the compulsion to return to the dark living room, to curl up motionless in a deep armchair, to forget —is hard to overcome. I should do something, somehow overcome the inertia of my soul. I raise my head and scream, scream until the pain tightens my throat.

She didn't want to leave me alone in the manor. We went to the family farm – which will always remain the first association with the word "home" for us. We happened to find Susanna there. A grown woman – against the light, with her hair hidden under a hat, almost indistinguishable from her mother. I even managed not to show anything of myself when we greeted each other; at first she only shook my hand, but then, after hesitating only for a fraction of a second, she fell into my arms. Apparently I was really coming back to myself, because in response to this gesture the Observer woke up inside my skull – he suggested words, manipulated my facial expression, stiffened my body. Susanna couldn't take her eyes off me either. Then she led me to the large mirror upstairs, in the boudoir of my twin aunts. Looking at our reflections, I understood what she meant: I looked like her brother, I was too young, especially now, after shaving off my beard and cutting my hair. Susanna seemed fascinated by this phenomenon. "Would you like that?" I smiled crookedly. She looked away.

But she was curious, she couldn't hide it. Conversation with her always drifted in this direction, and the jokes usually concerned my age. Was it envy, or naked curiosity about the miracle? The childhood chatter from the garden had clearly not been forgotten; perhaps she had forgotten it —it didn't change the fact that she was currently thinking as she thought, and she couldn't reverse the vectors of her interests. Was I supposed to make the extensa a dark secret?

I answered when she asked.

We went to the pastures together (it was not advisable to travel alone because of the outlaws). We met people from the East whom I didn't know, shepherds, itinerant craftsmen, one of the great families of the Country had recently moved from the coast, the ocean was flooding the rocky plains; Susanna introduced me, at which they grinned stupidly. At first I thought: well, yes, they know the stories about the mad hermit. But one windy night a young man came up to me by the campfire of the main camp and, shaking my right hand tightly, recited out of the blue, with a childlike sincerity in his blue eyes: "I've always admired you. Susanna told us that story so often that we'd almost stopped believing in you. I'm glad I met you." What could she possibly have been telling them, I wondered. She didn't remember the affair with the bandits, she was too young. She must have been repeating other people's stories. That's how absurd legends are born. At the last moment, the Observer stopped me from asking the young man how many of those horse thieves he thought I'd killed —a dozen, perhaps?

At night, under the stars, with a great fire burning my face and a cold wind whipping my back, the symmetry of sensations pressed me into the extensa until I almost forgot the human body. The neocortex slowly came to life, its miles of cerebral convolutions intertwined with my neural pathways, a single reproducible seed embedded in a dendritic crossroads opened the way to a trillion new neurodes, each rooted in giant lobes of the lunar logical structure: endless arrays of parallel semiorganic processors. The very size of that brain – truly astronomical – would have been a limitation and slowed down, complicated the thought processes, if not for the abundant seeding of reprosion molecules, the last unused batch from the original Seed, which had entered the red forest at its inception and spread throughout the neocortex with the growth of the forest's root system, so that its internal thought processes also took place at superluminal speeds, jumping from module to module by thousands of reprosion gates. The side effects did not keep me waiting long: I began to live in a state of permanent déjà vu, of stretched perception, I no longer recognized anything as completely new, in surprise, I remembered everything. Not really, but I could not get rid of such a mental aura. The entry of the neocortex into the speech centers caused recurrences of stuttering, as well as great difficulties in translating thoughts into grammatical linguistic structures. Various strange things distracted me to almost catatonic states, I would sometimes stare at a blade of grass or a cloud in the sky for a dozen or so minutes, then I couldn't say what it was about them that fascinated me so much. Then there were dreams, dreams I

had never had before —these were the dreams of the Sixth Moon. They tore me to shreds, I woke up on the verge of hysteria, mumbling something nonsensical, trembling, often in urine and excrement, for a long while I couldn't control my body, my hands made absurd gestures —attempts at surgery on nonexistent objects, the extensa spasmed in asynchronous contractions, my feet trembled, Eyes and Ears turned toward imaginary sources of radiation... The moon's subconscious was deep, dark, thoughts thick and greasy, opaque, one drowned as if in black oil. Awakened, I still felt those nightmares for a moment, but the harder I tried to remember them, to put them into familiar terms, to understand them, the faster they slipped away; and all that remained was an oily residue, a layer of black mud —on every thought, every impression. I only knew that it hurt a lot —there, in the moon's dreams.

All these were side effects, however, because the basic function and purpose of the neocortex were the description, analysis and explanation of the phenomenon of the Anomaly. It stretched in an amorphous nebula almost to the orbit of the Third; and yet it also reached far beyond the plane of the ecliptic. It obscured part of the Medusa's disk, wrapping around it like an accretion disk, but much wider and not as symmetrical, in vertical projection far from the shape of a spiral; hence the irregular changes in the observed brightness and emission spectrum of the star, which first drew astronomers' attention to the Medusa system. The absorption lines in the electromagnetic spectrum of the Anomaly suggested not hydrogen and helium at all, but heavier elements, up to unstable transuraniums. I could feel the hot primary radiation of the Anomaly on my palate, the extensa had already surrounded it in a full circle and was now emerging through successive peripheries toward the star's poles, so nothing could escape me, I recorded every jump in the intensity of the expulsion of elementary particles, and in that part of the Anomaly that crossed the Medusa system, it was indeed boiling like in a thermonuclear furnace, there was only a problem with the swift neutrinos, but even these were caught in a sufficient percentage by the armored spider of the vacuum, and immediately all the data collected in this way was swallowed by the lunar part of my brain, in order to rebuild and test models of the internal structure of the Anomaly anew.

The Spider was descending in a forced orbit, deeper and deeper into Medusa's gravity well, through the Fourth's orbit, its longest arms already reaching out to form independent probes, preparing its Fingers for the final Touch.

BARTHOLOMEW returned with the spring. He came to visit us one Sunday with the Pastor; it was Bartholomew's first visit to the farm.

He seemed to me to have become younger, decidedly more energetic —perhaps simply because he finally stopped wearing patched dressing gowns and baggy garden pants. He dressed like one of the cowboys from the western ranches, he even grew a bushy mustache. He also got a deep tan. But the most noticeable thing was the change in his posture: it was almost as if he had acquired a new spine. All he had to do was stop slouching and his hand would grow. He kissed ladies on the hand, bowing gallantly and laughing loudly —a social lion and the life of the party.

Susanna watched him with obvious disbelief.

"Grandpa, didn't you fall in love during one of those wanderings?" she asked him one afternoon, when we were shelling peas on the veranda (Elder Leon was snoring next to her, catching up on sleep —he never slept at night).

Master Bartholomew winked at her.

"How? You're the one who carries my heart in your pocket."

She always blushed easily and, as you can see, she still hasn't gotten over it.

"Don't joke. What happened to you, hmm? You look like a sack of potatoes has been lifted off your shoulders."

"Much more, my dear" he sighed "much more."

I looked at him searchingly. Susanna must have caught that look. She stared at Bartholomew, frowning, after putting down the bowl of peas.

"An extensa?" she spurt out.

Bartholomew grimaced cruelly. "Oh, I won't tell you!" Susanna was irritated. "You understand, it's a delicate matter."

"I know."

"I-I-I remember how you stood in front of the Organs when you were so-so little" I showed my hand. "To break away. In their l-lllight. I took you, you were already asleep. E-verything f-f ..."

“I won’t say that the amputation was painless, can you imagine the phantom pain —but now I’m free.”

“F-f-free” I repeated, trying to arrange new time hierarchies in my head: after all, I never really knew Bartholomew as Bartholomew, from the very beginning, from that night of horror, he was Bartholomew-plus—extensa.

“Oh, right.”

“So” Susanna inquired “will you start aging now?”

“I have always been aging, it’s not like we gain immortality. But if you’re asking about the pace of my aging - well, no, I can’t remove anything from my body.”

“Sus-sa, I’m craving for the elixir of youth.”

“That’s the worst possible motivation” Master Bartholomew shook his head. “It’s better to go to Them right away.”

“Oh, come on” she snorted. “Besides, I don’t know if I’d like to. With this bag on my back for —what? Two hundred years?”

“It varies. In my case, it was a quadruple system, over a light-month span, so it dragged on endlessly. But he —how is it with you?”

It was the first time we talked about our extensas so openly. Perhaps it was easy for Bartholomew, because he had already thrown off this burden, he was talking about the past, and above all —about something separate, not about himself; about some inanimate object. However, I felt embarrassed. Some things should not be asked openly, asked at all. How such pornography of the soul is humiliating!

With my eyes lowered to my fingers shelling peas, I tried to shield myself:

“Somehow, slowly. It’s coming.”

“But how much longer? I’m sure you have approximate calculations for the optimistic and pessimistic versions.”

“A-actually, I’m at the end. I’m closing the area. Only o-one.. they lick.”

"Oh! Ten years? Less?"

"Maybe."

"If some delicate operations are on the edge of the senses, you'd better use the sensory deprivation chamber." I've only seen Bartholomew himself use it once, that room that swells with tentacles and growths after the delinquent enters, until the person is completely encompassed by them, lifted into the air, suspended in the embrace of a soft and almost imperceptible mass, blind, deaf, cut off from all smells, until the only perceived reality is the extensa; and there are no more eyes, ears, hands or fingers other than those measured by kilometers of cold darkness. "In general —take a look there at last. It would be good to take care of the garden, after all it's a ruin. The orchard is going wild. What?"

"I-I w-would rather n-not."

"There are other ways to deal with sensory deprivation" Elder Leon muttered, at which we all looked at him, stopping what we were doing. Leon didn't even raise his eyelids, he just adjusted the position of his stump.

"No-no-no!" Bartholomew exclaimed. "How long have we been eavesdropped?"

"I must have heard something, I thought you were talking about me."

"I didn't know that my uncle even knew about such things."

"Uncle used to know a lot of strange things" sighed Leon "but uncle didn't feel like knowing any more. Uncle's leg hurts. Various devils would come here and offer it back, and whatever else uncle wanted; but uncle, stupid, didn't want it. Yet it would be enough to go to Mr. Bartholomew, to talk about the stars... Right?"

DANIEL replaced me on the Council during my absence, at first only temporarily, then permanently, or at least that was the status he had acquired in the imagination of others, which amounted to the same thing. However, the Council was an informal structure (there were no formal structures, any formalism was already a step on the path to the State), it did not have a predetermined number of members, so nothing stood in the way of my return. Indeed, it was enough for me to appear at its next meeting for custom to prevail, I joined the

work as if nothing had happened.

In addition to the problems with the division and distribution of "surplus goods", which I remembered well from years ago, the Council had a new nut to crack: the eastern shore of the Green Country was sinking beneath the ocean surface, the interior was quickly becoming steppe, the weather was losing its regularity and the correlation of temperature and pressure fluctuations with the seasons was decreasing. There were constant negotiations on this matter with Their representative, but each meeting in the Vault seemed to follow the same, fatalistic scenario.

"These are not natural conditions" someone from the Council said. "You can't cultivate crops this way, animals don't tolerate it well either. Besides, you force people to move, people abandon the homes in which their ancestors were born."

"We will gladly compensate any inconvenience" the Nameless One replied.

"But we don't want to become more dependent on your gifts than we already are!"

"I'm sorry."

"Just leave the Country alone."

"As I have explained many times, the fact that I represent them here before you does not mean that I control my brothers. You know that in reality no one has control over them."

Here the desperate insults began.

"Fraud! Liars! You are breaking the Covenant!"

The Nameless One sighed heavily.

"Who did you make the Covenant with? Have I ever claimed that I speak for everyone? There have always been only a handful of us —those who still remember you at all, who pay attention to the Green Country and —through the memory of their own origins, out of selfless curiosity or for some other sentiment to help you, protect you, agree to your limitations, convince other curious people to refrain from overt interference. This is the whole of the Alliance: us —me

and my friends' good will. That from the beginning, when we were just an experiment, an eccentric minority, and even later, when freedom in Involution was chosen by the majority of people, we have always respected your right to live as you wish. But I am talking here about our sovereign decision, which you, generation after generation, have ritualized into a great Alliance, a tradition of some sacred agreement. There never was one —only good will on the side of the stronger. You may not believe in it, I see you do not; but tell me then: what else would hold us back?"

"So you are incapable of doing anything?"

"I can make appeals to withdraw from some transformations; but this is never an independent decision, weather changes are a side effect of processes in which most of humanity is involved – although of course you no longer call it humanity. These are matters of great importance; of course I cannot describe them to you even approximately, but they mean a lot to us. If you were running to save a child, would you watch your step and avoid anthills? Yet we do our best."

Going out in front of the tent in the evening for a last cigarette, we commented on the negotiations gloomily, although without excessive pessimism: the Green Country had been Jonah in the belly of the whale from the beginning, an enclave at the mercy of the enemy. Only Daniel spoke more sharply; however, since we all knew that They could hear his words too, we made allowances for negotiation strategies – perhaps wrongly.

"I would not count on Their sophistication," he shook his head, blowing smoke. "Nor on the instinct for self-preservation; although, God and truth, instinct does not stop Them, because there is nothing to stop Them from. What could really threaten Them? Look at how it was with the Martian tribe: they got so looped, evolved so endlessly, multiplied so greedily that they destroyed the planet, fragmented it, and they eat, count, transform it further. What difference does it make to Them: a vacuum, not a vacuum, a planet, not a planet? Why do we live the way we do? So as not to be slaves to the process. But They are the ones who cannot stop, they have to check all the paths, and so the mathematical necessities of successive transformations drive Them, deeper and deeper, transformation after transformation, endlessly, and They do not know what awaits Them two steps further, even the destruction of the planet... So what mercy is there for us? We can only count on chance."

He prophesied in such a monotonous voice, staring into the darkness and lights of the Market, lazily drawing smoke into his lungs. Everything about him discouraged response, discussion: his tone, his posture, his facial expression.

Once, however, I could not stop myself.

"You'll never kno-w: w-what they w-ant, what th-they n-n-n-need. Do you know the difference yourself? How can I tell your future from the Moon? So w-what? Do they have such a prophecy themselves, which has to come true...?"

"So that's even worse. Right?"

"B-but then, w-what's the dif-ference? The w-worth?"

"Exactly" he mumbled, stepping on the cigarette butt.

I waited until he went back inside. It was long past the time for negotiations, I could be sure I wouldn't meet anyone. I looked back: no one was looking either. I entered the Vault, the door was open, it always is. With each step down, my heart beat faster, the extensa instinctively boiled energy in my black muscles, the moon in my brain generated baroque fears. I passed the vestibule, I was already in the hall. The Nameless One was sitting in the first chair from the entrance, drinking milk (or some other milky-white liquid) from a tall glass. I wondered fleetingly what he wanted to make me understand in this way. But since I couldn't read the sign, that was probably his goal: my confusion.

"Good evening" he said, wiping his mouth.

I didn't allow myself any pleasantries, I didn't even sit down. From his seat:

"I w-ant, if I were dying, that I would say no to anything."

"Ah. Our little Alliance." He put down the glass. "What if tomorrow, not dying at all, you come here and take those words back?"

"No."

"But if. Or growing old, for years. Today you are yourself, and then you won't be? How so?" He smiled slightly at this.

"You are like this. I don't want to."

"But you yourself argued, and rightly so: that these are axioms of tradition, that cultural training. To refuse when you can go on living —that's really inhuman. What is more important: a person or a community? What serves what?"

"I don't want to! This is y-your a-a ... He reached for my head, spreading his fingers, crooked them as if trying to penetrate the interior of my skull; I instinctively leaned back and retreated even further."

"I could convert you all at any moment," he said. "You would thank me sincerely afterwards. Do you think your consent is needed for this? A brain is a brain. A few seconds, that's how long it takes. But I don't do it. Why? Why don't we do it?"

THAT summer I finally closed my hand on the Anomaly. My Fingers were carefully immersing themselves in the dark cloud, in its sperm whale head, which was slowly swallowing —year after year —the Second; while the rest of the body, snake-like around Medusa and with an infinitely long tail reaching somewhere above the ecliptic, was swelling at a rhythm of over a month, but in such tiny increases (or rather redistributions of mass) that it would be completely imperceptible if not for the constant computations of the lunar brain.

Finger by Finger —one and a half ton probes, independent in decision-making, not connected directly to the reprosion nervous system, but sending data to the spider in laser shots of noise-encrypted packets —Finger by Finger gradually penetrated the areas of increasing density of the Anomaly. Right at its border, the probes opened their mouths and began to trawl the void, absorbing all the cosmic plankton into their analytical intestines they encountered. After being swallowed, it was sorted by mass, particles too light to prove to be anything more than mere "vacuum garbage" were immediately excreted, heavier particles were moved deeper into the probe's interior. There they were decomposed.

Excitement coursed through the *cerebrum lunae* in faster-than-light waves as the Fingers began to report molecular constructs resembling quantum reduction detectors used to register the Reinsberg/Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen effect in reprosion particles; constructs found more frequently the deeper I plunged the Fingers into the Anomaly, the more it thickened around them. That these de-

tectors resembled the grain structure known to the moon did not mean that they were identical to it – in fact, the differences predominated, only the purpose, the function of the atomic apparatuses was clear; the principles of operation of some parts of the anomalous grains or other of its non-reprosion molecular constructs remained unclear and incomprehensible. So the thought that first appeared in my head that I had come across the remains of the extensa of one of Master Bartholomew's predecessors, but the moon rejected it immediately. It could not be so. With each new data packet, his confusion grew, as he came across increasingly strange and less likely to be obtained in "natural" chemical processes compounds, heavy, complexly constructed molecules. I observed their behavior in an open vacuum. They combined, divided, created polymer chains, self-organized into potentially infinite sequences, meters, a hundred meters long. Fingers cut ribbons and networks stretching beyond the fields of their perception. Sometimes anomalous reprosions participated in these constructs, but in most cases the constructs did without them. The Moon strained its subterranean neural labyrinths to find order and pattern in the observed chaos, life-non-life; without success. The Anomaly stretched for thousands, millions, billions of kilometers, now denser, now thinner, spreading in a dark nebula over the oceans and continents of the Second, penetrating its atmosphere, having already settled on the surface of its only satellite.

I tightened my hand on the neck of the Anomaly, just behind its head, pushing the Fingers into its very core. Here, reconfigurations of structures of astronomical dimensions were already underway, objects the size of asteroids, planets, synthesized and disintegrated in a matter of seconds, in flashes of hot radiation. I sent one of the Fingers straight into the forming skeleton of a two-minute vacuum behemoth; at the moment of the Anomaly's maximum concentration, the probe, according to the program, exploded. The structure disintegrated. Eyes and Ears waited for a reaction. It happened only after almost a minute, but simultaneously along the entire Anomaly that I perceived: here and a quarter of a light hour further, with exactly the same delay, there was an increase in the intensity of radiation, suggesting an intensification of internal transmutation processes. This probably also happened an hour, a light week further —I do not know where the Anomaly ends, if it ends at all.

The moon collected more data, carried out more analyses —but the remaining part of my brain could only rotate this empty thought: that I had discovered (that I had just made a real discovery!) the missing Dark Matter of the universe.

THIS is what I would write in my Report, if I ever made it: "First contact with Alien extensa. Actual size difficult to assess, probably includes neighboring star systems. Perhaps it reaches further, having already digested the matter of previously seized stars; after appropriate dispersion of mass, in suspension of transmutation functions, it would be difficult to detect. I cannot calculate. It reacts to structural disturbances with a distinct delay, but —it is a structure bound by reprosion. Estimated age: three million years."

I did not make a mistake in classifying the Anomaly as someone's extensa. How could I have thought otherwise? The inference was correct. The unknown is always called by known names, because what other names do we have?

VI

WHO exactly had I met in the Medusa system? Who was it?

That was the question, because somehow I instinctively assumed that I was dealing there with one person, one mind —just as I, although encompassing the entire planetary system, was still a single personality.

Knowledge filled me, I carried Discovery within me like an angel's fetus, the shadowy halo of Mystery revolved above my head. Bartholomew had long since left, I could not talk to him —but Susanna had stayed on the farm for the entire summer, and she had noticed the signs the fastest. Her raised eyebrows, her voice hanging, her questioning glances —I did not even avoid them, I did not mask myself. I wanted to share my knowledge, to convey it as quickly as possible; fighting this imperative was like constantly holding my breath. It was obvious that sooner or later I would have to open my mouth.

It caught up with me on a hot September night, in the stable gate; Jasmine had just given birth to a healthy foal, we had been helping with the birth for almost two hours and now, exhausted and barely washed, we sat down under the open gate, Susanna and I. I took out some cigarettes. She asked for one.

"Do you smoke?"

"I'm just starting."

I lit it. I watched her take a drag. She didn't cough, which was a good sign.

"Have you tried tobac-co?"

She shook her head.

“I’d rather not.”

She was so absorbed in the act of smoking that she didn’t pay any attention to me and it was only after a few minutes that she realized I wasn’t taking my eyes off her.

“What?”

“I’m s—...” “Yes, yes.” She tilted her head, looked at me through the smoke. ”What about you? What? First kiss? First love?” She lightly pushed me on the shoulder. “Tell me something.”

So I told her about the extensa. I told her about Medusa, the Anomaly and the Dark Matter. I told her my Discovery and the secret of the universe.

She finished one, started another. I kept talking —I hadn’t managed such a long speech in months. As the words went on, I stumbled less often, overcame articulation obstacles more easily, instinct took precedence over deliberate grammar, and my story became more and more fluent. The moon rose. Anna, Daniel’s daughter, who was suffering from insomnia again, went down to see the foal; I fell silent for the time she was there. Then I continued talking, adding ever more minute details, trying to convey the general impression with a mass of details, to describe the shape of a feeling that I knew could not be described, had to be experienced for oneself. Such things are unspeakable.

But something, something beyond empty Knowledge, leaked to Susanna in awkward words. I could hear the excitement in her voice as she asked:

”What will you do now? Will you try to communicate? How? Could he have mistaken the explosion for an attack? Was he sending some probes your way?”

I laughed, and Susa soon joined in the laughter.

“But you’ll tell me, if anything? Right? You’ll tell me?” she pressed on as we walked home.

“I’ll tell you.”

In the meantime, however, Daniel and I had to go to the Council meeting

at the Market. As a result of the influx of re-settlers from the east, numerous border disputes arose regarding land rights and grazing rights, and we spent the whole day resolving them; and even then people left dissatisfied, and usually both sides. The negotiations in the Vault dragged on, as they usually did lately. Everyone was already leaving when the Nameless One stopped me with a quiet word:

"Wait."

I hesitated. Bucher Junior was just disappearing into the vestibule. I was left alone, willingly or unwillingly.

"W-what?"

"There is a way for you to buy yourselves out."

"Fuck off...?"

"Yes."

I pulled up a chair and sat down. He was half-leaning against the tabletop, his perfectly white shirt almost hurting his eyes in the perfectly monochromatic light.

"You lied."

"No. There is simply something now that is worth these sacrifices on their... part."

"Sacrifice!" I snorted. "That you won't flood the Cou-Country.

"You don't even realize what changes in our plans this will require. But we don't take it by force, although we could, and in fact most would prefer it. We just want a fair exchange."

"So w-what's w-w-worth so much to you?"

"You."

"Me."

He didn't say anything more; he just looked me straight in the eye, slightly tilted, no longer making any expressions, his face as serious as it was sincere,

and yet I knew that I only saw what he wanted me to see. How much of what I thought —did I think under his dictation?

I thought (my moon thought) this: Where did the sudden change come from? What is so unusual about me? Only the extensa. But they must have known about it for a long time, just as they knew about everything. So what has changed recently? Only this: I have learned the secret of the Anomaly. They have heard my conversation with Susanna, of course. But why should They be interested in the Anomaly, a manifestation of an alien civilization half a thousand light years away, someone's inflated extensa? Why? They have never been interested in such things; if it were otherwise, they would not have left the Organs at the mercy of Bartholomew and his ilk in the first place, but would have taken possession of the collections of the complementary reprosium themselves; and they did not do so. Now, however, in order to possess them, they are ready to "renounce." How is this supposed to happen? How am I supposed to give it to them...?

He looked at me, registered the smallest signals of my body. I could not shake the feeling that He was also following the course of my thoughts, association after association.

"I-I-I-I-aa..." I stammered "I-how...?"

"It cannot be separated" he said. "The Master was right: it will remain in your organism until the end. It is impossible to dissect, cell by cell, to unravel the brain neuron by neuron. That is, yes, it is possible, and this is the only way. You know how." He extended his hand, but this time in a gesture of greeting, invitation, leaning in even deeper, his face troubled, his gaze —compassionate. "Come to us."

"I don't believe it."

"I know what you promised yourself. But it is not for yourself, it would be for the Country. Know also that the offer is not indefinite, in the end those who want to it take by force will probably prevail."

He came closer, not lowering his hand until he placed it on my shoulder. I flinched instinctively. He slowly moved his hand over the material of the sweater, toward my neck and chin, pressed it lightly to my cheek; there was some obscene eroticism in it, I couldn't move, enslaved by the subtlety of his movements. He

leaned down to my ear.

“Do you feel it?” he whispered. ”Warm. Touch it. Listen to the pulse. You’ll hear the blood in me. You’ll hear the heart. Smell it. I sweat if I want to. My hair grows if I want to. I breathe if I want to. I am more real than you; while also being something infinitely greater.” Indeed, with each word his hot breath hit the conch of my ear. A hand with perfectly even nails tightened on my jaw. At some point I had to lower my eyelids, he had completely hypnotized me. I knew they were capable of such things; and yet... “Do you think I don’t understand you? That I don’t understand your dilemmas? Nothing could be further from the truth. I also have such a little man inside me, he confides your dramas and joys in me; or I pull his skin over me and then I experience them myself. I hate when I want to. I fear when I want to. I love when I want to. I desire when I want to,” he whispered incessantly. “Now I desire. Give us your extensa. Give. Give. Give. Give. Give. Give. Give.”

He wanted only one word, a sign of will. I could almost feel a quivering ”T-t-take...” forming on my lips. But a meteor shower was just passing the Sixth, several larger ones fell in short succession on its satellites, the *cerebrum lunae* was superficially damaged, waves of daze passed through my brain. I jumped to my feet, not knowing what I was doing, half-conscious; but already consciously continuing my movement, I ran out of the hall and up the stairs from the Vault.

The Nameless One was waiting for me just outside the door, I had barely stepped out into the clear night when he grabbed my arm.

“Don’t let false pride fool you! Do you think you’re worth more than all of them? You won’t give in, but let the rest go to hell. Under the water! Right? Right?”

I tore myself away. I ran to the horses. We were supposed to spend the night at the Market, no one was leaving that night. I quickly saddled up Rusalka, watching out for the Nameless One in the half-shadows. After all, he wouldn’t stop tempting, he wouldn’t give in.

I didn’t see him though, and it wasn’t until I trotted out of the Market that I realized I didn’t have to see him at all. He would tempt me anyway. A whisper, a disembodied but sleepily melodic voice, began to seep into my right ear:

“Do you think you’re able to resist us? How? By killing yourself, perhaps?

You're welcome to, we'll welcome you with joy. But if you don't kill yourself, time will be against you, because with every minute, every second – and seconds are not the same for us as they are for you – the impatient grow more impatient, the ruthless grow more ruthless, and the moment inevitably approaches when we will no longer be able to stop them, and they will take you without question, but also without any benefit to the Green Country. So what are you counting on? In the name of what are you resisting?"

So on, and so forth, mile after mile, fifteen minutes after fifteen minutes, he exuded his venom, and I could do nothing about it. It was dawning, I was approaching home, swaying in the saddle and generating meaningless shapes from the extensa, tired, angry and terrified, and it was getting harder and harder not to answer.

"B-but w-what for?" I finally burst out. "What do you need my ex-ex-extensa for? T-the A-a-a-an-o-maly? W-what for?!"

"The Anomaly; what you call Anomaly. To communicate with it, to connect to it, of course. We heard you describing it to your daughter."

The foal climbed another hill. Against the pinking sky, I saw the cemetery oak. Curtains of bluish-blue mists obscured the distant horizon. I dug my heels into the horse's flanks.

"W-what for?"

"How would you describe us?"

How would I describe Them? They were invisible, but the Anomaly also remained invisible to the human eye. You would probably see a dark shadow, a veil of darkness in its greatest density, but no more. It is true that They left the Green Country alone, only beyond its borders.... Only in accidental Perversions, those diamond rains, rusting plants, black hurricanes and monstrosities of nature, only did the features of Their nature manifest themselves here in a way that was noticeable to us.

I could no longer get rid of the image I had once aroused. Even when it fell silent, I felt its presence in my ear, around my head, everywhere around me. With every step, jumping down onto the veranda, entering the kitchen,

passing through the house, I had the impression that I was walking through it, tearing through its body dissolved in the air. The extensa instinctively strained its perceptive modules, Eyes and Ears turned in random bursts in the directions of potential threats.

Susanna wasn't in her room, she was already up; I found her only in the backyard, helping Ezekiel load the wagon. I quickly pulled her aside, into the coach house.

"But what happened...?!"

"They want to go to the Anomaly."

"What?"

"Their bro-thers. From oth-er stars. You can see the whole world In-vol-vol-uting. Before or after. Nnnonhumans. For millions of years. They want to b-b-be with them now."

"Who?"

"Them. T-they."

"But..."

"a kn-knife."

I grabbed her wrist. She didn't pull away, she looked with wide eyes. I slid the sleeve off my forearm. The web of void contracted reflexively, waiting for the blow. Before that, I had wiped the blade on my trousers.

He put his hand on my shoulder. Susanna screamed.

"It won't do any good, you know that."

"G-go away!"

He moved away, but he was still only an arm's length away. Susanna couldn't tear her eyes away from him. The Nameless One winked at her. Only then did she recover.

"What do you really want to do? Dad?"

"You won't split the extensa, that's impossible," he said before I could answer. "You wanted to infect all the inhabitants of the Land like that? No way. The reprosome doesn't circulate in your blood, it's nested deep in your body, and mainly in your brain. Even if they ate you, you wouldn't transfer it that way either. Only we can unravel you."

I bared my teeth.

"My f—..." She moved her gaze from the knife to her wrist and mine, and back again.

"Do you believe him?"

"He believes me, he believes me," assured the Nameless One.

I lunged at him, slashing his throat. He didn't move, letting the metal enter his body. Blood gushed out, staining his perfectly clean shirt. He put his cupped hand under his chin and gathered the gore steaming in the morning chill. It stopped leaking from the wound; then he drank, tilting his head back and looking at us from under lowered eyelids.

"Nothing in me is lost against my will," he said. "Nothing falls apart. The only entropy that has access to us is the entropy of information, and it is at our service. You can wrap yourself in any form. Do you want to be human? Go ahead! But maybe you prefer a planetary system? Inside.

Slowly, despair was flooding me, I stopped seeing any way out of this trap. After all, the attack on the Nameless One was already an outburst of blind desperation.

I turned to Susanna.

"Don't talk. Don't tell him anything."

I ran to the stable for a fresh horse. The Nameless One left me alone, but now I interpreted it rather as an ominous sign, a signal of awareness of his victory.

He didn't say a word during the ride to the manor either. In fact, I was aware that I wouldn't overtake Them —neither in thought nor in action —but I had to keep moving, maintain the appearance of a fight; having given up (I

felt it), sooner or later I would say "Yes" to him.

The manor was quiet and dark, but as I ran through the floor to the metal stairs, I noticed through the window open to the garden a yellow light casting long rectangles on the patio. The dungeon, however, the dungeon was not illuminated by any light. I had to go back for a candle. The empty glass of the Organs shone with the dark red reflections of its flame. I went closer to make sure. There was no doubt: the sleeves had been emptied despite the lack of any visible holes in them.

They wasted no time; and there was no sentimentality here. Had they asked Bartholomew for permission? They were still asking me... My imagination did not slow down: I could almost see those colorful rivers of released reprosion grains, slowly dissolving in the air, absorbed by Involution, growing into it, binding Them to complementary sets of grains in the cores of interstellar probes by the force of the REPR paradox and blooming there from under their armored shells, slowly but inexorably, countless extensa, one hundred and two hundred and three hundred light years from Earth —black prosthetics of Their bodies, of They who have no bodies...

I thought I would find Bartholomew on the patio, but despite the dusk he was working in the garden. I called to him, standing in front of the bright windows. He approached, wiping his hands on the sleeves of his shirt.

"D-did you see the O-or-gans?"

"Hmm?"

"Em-p-ty.

I quickly told him about the blackmail, omitting the more difficult words to pronounce.

"Looks like you have no choice," he concluded, sitting down on one of the wicker chairs.

"They are l-eav-ing."

"I know."

"Have they been to you alr-ea-dy?"

"No." He shrugged. "Why? I wrote a Report, they know they won't contact any Alien Involution through my extensa."

It was already so dark (clouds covered the late evening sky) that if it weren't for the light from inside the manor, I wouldn't have seen his face at all; and so I saw mostly shadows, and under his eyebrows —the black plums of sunken eye sockets. He was twitching his mustache thoughtfully and suddenly I wanted to laugh at the sight of this gesture.

The Observer hissed in my ear: Clench your fists, it's Hysteria, we won't let her in! I'm telling you what to do! Listen to me!

"Come on." Master Bartholomew stood up, pulled me by the arm. "Have you eaten anything? You look wasted. You're not going anywhere now anyway. Come on."

He began to bustle around the stove in the kitchen, he had a supply of prepared fish in the fridge, which he started frying with grotesque devotion, after washing himself and tying an authentic chef's apron around his waist. True, everything was grotesque in my eyes now, the very fact that I was sitting here, in brightly lit kitchen freshly painted blue, and waiting humbly for what might be my last supper, was so absurd that the Observer had to grip me with iron claws, and I was still trembling slightly, lips and fingers, eyelids and leg muscles, coal fringes of extensa and red forest of the lunar brain.

"Trout have also recently appeared in Sevenfold, and they are even biting nicely, the day before yesterday on this slope under the willows I took a nap by the water and...".

"Jjjesus."

He gave me a quick glance, tossing a piece of fish meat into the pan, the fat hissing loudly.

"I know, I know, injustice and all. But if it is as you say, do you have any choice? They will take you anyway, right? So what do you care? The taste of hot trout, that's not the worst last pleasure."

I looked at him in horror, as if at a madman suddenly exposed in his many years of madness. He meant it seriously.

"What?" he snorted, clearly noticing my expression. "You thought that what? That you could oppose Them?"

I didn't answer.

"I watched as they convinced you of that," he said, his back turned to me, "generation after generation, from infancy, not even explaining anything or giving direct commandments, but in hidden assumptions of words and behaviors, as things that were supposedly obvious; you convinced yourselves of that pride and sense of superiority, and contempt for Them, and a conviction, quite religious, of some historical mission. You don't even know who They are; although I have books on the history of Involution in my library. So what about the others? You're already reducing it to the level of a myth, a family ghost story. The members of the Council don't come from anywhere else, they weren't raised any differently, so they hold the same prejudices and probably behave the same way during conversations in the Vault. Am I right?

He turned the fish over, they sizzled.

"So why should we be surprised that you can't accept this simple fact: we live because it's Their whim. The Green Country exists because they haven't decided to devour it yet, as they have, they've absorbed the rest of the Earth's surface. It's not us, but They who constitute a higher form."

"If you think so, w-why don't I...?

"Ah. Because I've gotten used to it. But you? It's unimaginable to you. You don't understand the transition. The process of translation is magic to you. Probably would be for you too. What have you even understood from your reading?"

"That Th-they are n-no peo-ple."

"Noo, that's a lot, really. You didn't even recognize Involution in the Anomaly. You've already forgotten. This suspension, this center of atomic machines, this network of the smallest particles, binding into forms and structures dependent on Their will, permeates the air, water and earth, is present in every cubic millimeter of earthly matter, also here, in the Country. And Them? They are these forms and structures. Just as you are the structure of your brain connections. The transition is smoother than it might seem. I

would say: inevitable; and I am not at all surprised to discover that other, older species made it billions of years ago. In a way, it was obvious. You read about the history of the technological spiral. Having found a solution more effective than others, sooner or later you have to switch to it, and it is better to do it sooner, because whoever gets ahead of us will sooner find an even more effective solution. Such is the logic of the evolution of civilization. These solutions in successive optimizations are getting closer and closer to the ideal that is common to all biology, cultures and ways of reasoning, because there is one universe and universal laws of its physics for all."

He slid the fried fish onto plates, opened a jar of compote and, having untied his apron, sat down at the table. Previously, I had eaten bread and jam here with Larisa. I glanced at the windowsill: no vermin dared to show themselves anymore. Had he cleaned the entire manor himself —it flashed through my mind —or had he simply asked for a favor as part of his Covanent?

"Hmmm, watch out for the bones. I hope you'll visit me. My other friends who went through Involution rarely find the time or desire. We probably really aren't a big attraction for Them, life in logical constructs with unlimited parameters must be incomparably more interesting; there, Inside. Go ahead, eat. Did he give you a deadline? The sooner you apply, the more you can bargain for. This could buy the Country another few thousand years. There is some symmetry in this, though, that only after Shanna's death...".

He spoke and spoke. I sat up straight, letting the Observer control my body, especially making sure not to blink too often while I opened and closed the extensa's wings nervously, quickly and faster. I was already certain that Master Bartholomew was completely mad.

WHY south? Actually, the direction didn't matter, but I didn't want to turn back, because I was afraid of the inevitable meetings with family, friends... I was running away south. I left before dawn; I couldn't fall asleep anyway, and even if I did —there were already lunar nightmares waiting for me, the black oil of terror. Better to get on a horse, gallop into the dawn. As long as there was movement, sweat of hope. I wouldn't be able to endure another talk from Master Bartholomew anyway.

So I was running away —knowing perfectly well that I wouldn't escape any-

thing. I couldn't even turn my thoughts away, the image of a billion-year-old Universal Involution, slowly digesting the matter of all galaxies and spreading in a low-albedo mass through the interstellar and intergalactic vacuum burned through my imagination. I was riding south. On the first day I hadn't seen any signs yet. On the first night, I seemed to see something, on the border of shadow and darkness, where semi-darkness loses its fractional name, some slow movements, the creeping of shapeless masses as I lay by a small fire, balancing on the edge of lunar sleep, and certain of an inevitable fall into a black abyss. I fell into it on the second day, having dozed off in the saddle. I emerged from the moon's dreams with a cry that made birds rise from the surrounding trees. Then I noticed: those birds and those trees. A raven that had multiplied by two in flight; a maple tree from whose branches magpies hatched; a vulture circling above me at such a height that in proportion its wingspan must have exceeded ten meters; a birch that had not been there the last time I looked. The hour was approaching and they would not let me forget. How could I? The Universal Involution focused all my thoughts. The second night I could hardly keep myself awake. When I left Bartholomew's manor, I hadn't thought of taking more provisions, and the game gave me a wide berth, and all I had left was dry bread. I washed it down with sugar water. The vacuum spider had received a strong dose of X-rays, my head ached, and in the morning I began to bleed from my nose. It was hard to breathe, warm blood ran down the roof of my mouth and down the back of my throat. I was reminded of the Nameless One's blasphemous ritual. Lying down on the ground, I could feel them moving beneath the surface of the earth, small shocks and ripples lifting me up on the blanket; I could also hear them rustling and whispering in the darkness. I knew, of course, that they wanted to scare me. But knowledge was useless against feelings, especially at night: I was terrified. I clutched my rifle in my cold hand. On the third day, I reached the old road leading to the ruins of Qaqortoqu and Nanortalik. If I wanted to continue south, I would soon have to jump into the ocean. There were remains of buildings and other relics of pre-Involution culture along the road, but I was so exhausted that I hardly paid any attention to my surroundings. I only looked out for signs of Their presence. They appeared in greater and greater numbers. Toward the evening, the entire northern horizon was one high wall of purple, as if someone had turned the surface of the sea bathed in the light of the setting sun by ninety degrees, and the sun was indeed setting on waves of red. The world had lost its natural colors. My skin looked as if washed with blood, while the blood, which was still running from both nostrils, looked like mud. The horse had stopped listening to me from the moment the

blades of grass began to grab his legs, wrapping themselves around his fetlocks in spirals of fibers, suddenly very strong. I walked, leading him by the bridle. Finally, however, he broke free from me for good when the ground began to sway under his hooves. He jerked his head, reared up, I jumped back to avoid a fatal blow (given the family tradition, it would certainly have been fatal), he was already running blindly ahead, stumbling every now and then, as his legs sank into sinkholes, his great whites turning in his terrified eyes. He would run like this until his muscles gave out, this is how you drive wild steeds to the point of exhaustion, until when they finally fell, so exhausted that they were completely indifferent to the outside world, you could put a bridle on them. I understood then, watching the retreating mount, what the point of my escape was and how it would end. I knew it, and they knew it.

As if the unstable ground beneath my feet weren't enough, the wind picked up and I soon lost my bearings as visibility dropped to a mere dozen or so paces. The rest of the world was blocked off by clouds of dark red dust, and even that behaved unnaturally, forming fantastic shapes and pushing against the wind; the electricity in the air made my hair stand on end. I walked through the brown slurry, trying to breathe with my mouth closed, shielding my eyes with my arm, barely able to lift my feet, sucked in by the boiling earth with every step, and the extensa added weight to my shoulders—billion-ton wings slung across my back. So when I glimpsed the shadow of an ancient ruin through the churning red, I turned toward it without thinking. All that remained of the structure, whatever it had been in the days before Involution, were two walls and a fragment of the concrete foundations. But that was still a great comfort: now I had partial shelter from the wind, dust and bloody apparitions, the ghosts could only approach me from one side; and I could sit down without fear of being swallowed by the hungry earth.

I don't know when the sun disappeared below the horizon; darkness must have fallen in my hiding place much earlier. The horse had escaped with the saddlebags and all the camp belongings, and in the pocket of my jacket, along with an empty cigarette case, I found an iron lighter. This rubbish, blown over the years into a corner of the ruin, was just enough for a guard fire: a small bush of thin flames, giving off just enough light to make everything outside the ruin one monumental Shadow. From it, Forms emerged and disappeared in it. I sat and stared at them dully. Physical and mental fatigue had drained me of all thought and emotion, only some Plans and Calculations were still circulating in the lunar labyrinths of my brain. The roar of the wind grew louder, the

monsters drew closer. Time was done. I can recognize fate when I look it in the face.

He circled the edge of the storm, alternately emerging and hiding in the darkness, the hurricane exploding in clouds of debris where he emerged into the light. Sometimes he would advance a step further, then the Shadow would peel itself off his back and bounce back into the clouds of brown chaos.

"There you go. You have nothing to fear," he said. "I wouldn't lie to you. You're not losing anything; you're gaining everything."

"Y-you're really not my grand-father."

"I am," he repeated, stroking his tangled beard and stepping even closer. "I am. Believe me. Everything that constituted my identity still exists. The mind remained intact: the shape of a thought does not change with the change of its medium; a poem sounds the same whether written on paper or carved in stone. Protein brain, inorganic processor, a reconfiguration field of Involution —no meaning. All the rest is just reflections of the mind. Acts of will.

He sat down on the other side of the fire, lit his pipe. I knew well why he was doing it: he was trying to recall the mood and trust from our conversations on the farm roofs, that intimacy. But again: knowledge did not protect against feeling. Had he succeeded?

"Y-yet you will t-take it b-b-by f-force anyway." I looked away from him. Behind him, in the tunnel of his shadow, the Second Forms were boiling furiously. "Everything is a lie."

He spat smoke, not hiding his anger.

"If that's what you really think," he said, rising, his bushy eyebrows furrowed and his fist clenched around the hot pipe stem, "then how do you explain why we haven't converted you yet?"

I shrugged.

"W-why are you doing what you're do-ing?"

"Why are you doing what you're doing? Do you know? What's stopping

you? What are you hoping for? You're just wasting the chance of the Country."

"I'll c-hange. I'd do some things."

"Really?" he snorted, leaning over me and raising his pipe; his hooked nose gave him the resemblance to a bird of prey. "You wouldn't do? What kind? Do you remember Kolai?"

"What ab-bout Kolai? I r-remember e-ve-rything."

"Oh? Really?" He sneered now, not even hiding his malice. "How you murdered him and buried him in the garden? Do you remember that too?"

"F-f-fan-g-g b-b-bandits"

"No bandits. First with a kitchen knife in the stomach, and when he fled upstairs, you finished him off by smashing his skull on the floor."

"Why would I have k-killed Ko-Kolai...?" I cried in despair.

Grandpa Michael took a step back, into the Shadow, and stayed there for two heartbeats, and when he returned to the flickering light of the fire, he was already Kolai. I almost jumped at the sight, because it was Kolai not only in appearance, but also in movements. When he jerked toward me, balancing on his broad shoulders to stick out his left leg in the last, it seemed, moment before losing balance, in gestures, when he jabbed the air above me with a straightened finger, in the expression of his face, when he clenched his jaw and opened his dark eyes wide —and in words:

"You! You! You!" he hissed. "You and Bartholomew! All the evil that comes from you! I knew you would waste her, that only misfortune would come with you... Not people, you can't even love. Only use her, this way and that way, for your own purposes, your own dirty pleasures. You! For destruction! For damnation! I knew, and I tried to save her, but...forgive me, God! May you both...".

Here he stopped and took half a step back; he looked at me in terror, his mouth still open, his trembling hands quickly groping the front of his shirt, on which a dark stain was growing. It lasted a few seconds. Then he screamed and fled into the Shadow.

I lowered my gaze to the fire. The flames jumped on the plant debris, almost dying out under the stronger breaths of wind, but never disappearing simultaneously and completely; the small, trembling heart of the fire beat uninterruptedly. I wanted to shrink then, curl up and hide in him, the last bit of warmth in the universe.

He put his hand on my shoulder, squeezed. I tore my gaze away from the flames.

"Come," he whispered. "In Involution you won't be lonely; or completely isolated from reality, if that's what you desire. You'll change your mood, memory and desires just as easily as you're changing your facial expression now. Should I lead you? Come."

He extended his other hand in an inviting gesture. It was enough for me to take it in my hand, close the gesture.

I gritted my teeth. So he thinks he's broken me? That all he has to do is play the Kolai prank and I'll give in?

"Nne..." I began.

The dependence is mutual, however, the extensa spider tightening its orbit emerged from the shadow of the Third, the hot radiation of Medusa hit it, the current passed through my nerves, starting from my left shoulder. I jerked my arm, my hand rose, I shook Grandpa Michael's hand, and here I am involuting, rewriting myself into the Form of a network of microparticles covering the entire Earth in fractions of a second, a faster-than-light wave of information washing over the planet, me.

In Extensa

Now, that is, when, is time still passing, is anything changing, is this really happening or just in my imagination, how to distinguish thoughts from experiences, illusion from body, what touches me, what devours, what is being devoured by me, and what I only imagine in fear, I, that is, who? Now, when the word becomes flesh, before I have even fully uttered it, but I do not even have to utter it, besides I have no mouth unless I first want to have one, so it is enough to want, and the desire becomes flesh, only I no longer know what I really want. Now, that is, in the infinitely long moment of non-simultaneity, when there is no place where I am not, and no place where I am; when everything that is not me is my extensa, and there is nothing that I could point to and sincerely think: "this is me;" when I still feel the Medusan extensa, the gravitational forces of the star, planets and Anomalies, I still burn with the spider of the void in the fire of the red sun, I still hear with my Ears and see with my Eyes, and I think with the moon, but it is no longer my decisions that influence them, not my will, not mine alone, and it is not I who stretch out my Fingers toward the black bands of the Alien Involution, not I —although I am still those Fingers, and after joining it to the same extent I will be that Involution, the fabric of the universe, its nervous system, for which the whole rest of existence constitutes a momentary Extensa. In the meantime, and I am not sure when that was, I do not even know whether I have died or am alive, or perhaps it is a state different from those, what do words mean anyway? I can speak all the languages of the world that have existed and that can exist, I only need to clothe the desire in thoughts, these thoughts are also Forms of Involution, I will give them greater energy, they will begin to multiply, I will already know more precisely what I desire, they will begin to multiply even faster, grammatical structures will

develop along the lines of my imagination, the Form will achieve its final shape, and because I will also be this Form. The words of the language thus conceived will flow from my lips without thinking. So it is with everything. Impossibilities are things not yet sufficiently thought out. But they press on tirelessly, the stony storms of their (i.e. our, i.e. my) thoughts roll ceaselessly over the surface of the Earth, or rather what is left of it, because only the Green Country, the last enclave, has preserved a resemblance to the old world, the rest is only material for Involution, which it successively devours and processes into its body, into this suspension of microorganisms or micromachines, because this too is just a matter of choosing a word, it devours animals, plants, trees and bacteria, and viruses, rocks, deserts, seas, magma and coal, also air, also the rays of the Sun. The Moon's tribe is younger, just as the Moon looked from Earth hundreds of years ago, now neither continents and oceans nor atmospheric fronts can be seen from orbit, now, that is, when?

In the garden of all possibilities, even temptations are too many. I am torn from desire to desire, and none is strong enough to pull me into a new Form for long, and as a result I float through Involution on an incoherent wave of random associations. What takes over memory for a moment is realized in images and shapes; and I remember everything, a great deal anyway. Once I am a six-year-old boy running at night across rooftops; once a frightened father with a baby in his arms; once a mad old man. Sometimes, I even solidify into the Form of a body, such as I remember, but outside the Country a body is of no use, neither can I see nor hear anything with it, in this constant storm of reconfiguring particles, in a logical storm. So I fall on the Country in a desperate attempt to concentrate my thoughts, to organize my mind, I fall like a spring rain, a short downpour of invisible drops, dispersed over square kilometers, and even wider, but here I am condensing, still uncertain, undecided, searching for a point of reference for memories, an axis of condensation for Form: this house, this river, these people, these objects, still with my fingerprints on their faces. To stand on my feet again, raise my eyes to the sun, stretch my arms, draw air into my lungs. The wind rustles in the branches above my head, autumn damp hangs in the evening quarter-darkness. Susanna's shadow creeps across the grass and roots as she leans over the last in the row, the fourth cross, on which my name is carved. I stand right behind her, within arm's reach, but she doesn't see me yet, doesn't feel me until I reach out and touch her fair hair, her warm skin. What will I tell her? The truth, but I still do not know the Form of this truth. What will I persuade her to do? I do not know yet, thoughts are still multiplying,

temptations flow through Involution in uneven waves. But, raising my arm, I am already certain of the body, gesture and tone of voice with which I will greet my daughter as soon as she turns her tear-filled eyes toward me, which I can already see now; and I am certain of her first scream with which she will recoil from me, in the terror and disgust that usually precede the deepest fascination. Here, under the cemetery oak, where my grave is.

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